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Australia



NORTHERN TERRITORY

Regional Insights Report

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Acknowledgement of Country

Regional Development Australia Northern Territory 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.

Context and Limitations



Context and Limitations

This Regional Insights Report presents findings from Regional Development Australia Northern Territory's (RDA NT) 2025 regional insights process, drawing on stakeholder surveys, Committee workshops, targeted regional engagement and a review of economic and demographic data. The evidence base reflects conditions and perspectives at the time of engagement and analysis.

Since the completion of the 2025 insights process, Northern Territory regions have experienced a number of significant events, including major flooding in parts of the Territory and a fuel supply and price crisis that has affected households, businesses and service delivery. These events have intensified several of the structural challenges identified in this report, particularly around connectivity and freight reliability, cost of living and cost of doing business, energy security, and the resilience of critical infrastructure and essential services.

The themes in this report remain highly relevant because they reflect the underlying, systemic drivers of regional development outcomes across the Northern Territory.

- Liveability pressures
- Workforce shortages and skills mismatches
- Investment readiness and capability gaps
- Connectivity limitations
- A strong appetite for First Nations-led economic development

However, recent events may have changed how these issues are being experienced in some regions, as well as their relative intensity.

Readers should therefore interpret the findings as a considered baseline rather than a real-time account of all current conditions. RDA NT will continue to supplement this report with ongoing intelligence gathering, targeted engagement and future updates to ensure emerging impacts from natural disasters, market shocks and policy changes are reflected in its regional development, advocacy and investment readiness activities.



Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This Regional Insights Report presents a comprehensive analysis of the opportunities, challenges and development priorities identified through Regional Development Australia Northern Territory's (RDA NT) 2025 regional insights process. Drawing on extensive stakeholder surveys, RDA NT Committee workshop, targeted regional engagement and a review of economic and demographic data, the report provides a robust evidence base reflecting both Territory-wide trends and region-specific realities.

The insights highlight that while the Northern Territory's regions are highly diverse in geography, culture and economic structure, there are strong common themes shaping regional development outcomes. Five Territory-wide themes emerged consistently across stakeholder groups and regions:

- **Liveability pressures**, including access to housing, health services, childcare, community infrastructure and amenities, alongside challenges in retaining population and workforce.
- **Workforce shortages and skills mismatches**, particularly in essential services, trades, hospitality, tourism and community-facing roles, compounded by limited training pathways in remote areas.
- **Investment readiness and capability gaps**, especially for early-stage project development, feasibility work and navigating funding pathways.
- **Connectivity limitations**, including digital access, transport reliability, freight and logistics constraints, and energy security.
- **A strong and growing appetite for First Nations-led economic development**, grounded in local decision-making, cultural knowledge, caring for Country and long-term capability building.

These insights directly informed the development of RDA NT's Strategic Plan 2026–2029 and reinforce the organisation's focus on coordinated advocacy, liveability, investment readiness, workforce development and organisational capability, which is being operationalised through the Interim Implementation Plan for February–July 2026. While the NT's scale and remoteness present enduring challenges, the findings also demonstrate significant opportunities for place-based development aligned with local strengths, culture and emerging industries.

1. Introduction



Regional Development Australia Northern Territory (RDA NT) undertook a Territory-wide regional insights process during 2025 to strengthen its understanding of the current and emerging regional development landscape and to ensure future strategic planning reflects the priorities and lived experiences of communities, industry, local government and First Nations organisations. Engagement and data collection for this report were completed prior to major flooding events and a fuel supply and price crisis experienced in parts of the Northern Territory in 2026.

The insights process occurred during a period of significant transition and complexity for the Northern Territory, characterised by:

- Ongoing demographic shifts, including population mobility between regions;
- National and Territory-wide workforce shortages;
- Rising cost-of-living pressures affecting households, businesses and service delivery;
- Growing national and international interest in the NT's natural resources, renewable energy potential, agribusiness and strategic location; and
- Increasing expectations for transparency, collaboration and evidence-based decision-making across all levels of government.

The insights gathered through this process form a critical knowledge base that supports RDA NT's role as a trusted connector, facilitator and provider of regional intelligence. They also provide an evidence-led foundation for targeted advocacy, capability development and strategic investment across the Northern Territory.

2. Methodology



A mixed-methods approach was applied to ensure the findings reflect both quantitative trends and qualitative, place-based perspectives. Stakeholder engagement activities and data collection for this Regional Insights Report were undertaken throughout 2025.

2.1 Stakeholder Survey

A structured stakeholder survey was undertaken in September 2025, designed and delivered with Remote Strategy Plus. The survey was distributed across a wide range of sectors, including local government, industry, regional businesses, First Nations organisations, community service providers, training organisations and regional development bodies. It captured perspectives on:

- Regional strengths and barriers;
- Priority issues and opportunities;
- Workforce challenges;
- Funding and investment needs;
- Infrastructure and connectivity constraints; and
- Liveability considerations.

The survey achieved 46 responses, with respondents representing all major regions in addition to around one third of whom work across the whole NT, providing a broad and balanced evidence base.

2.2 RDA NT Committee Workshops

Two facilitated workshops with the RDA NT Committee explored:

- Emerging regional and industry opportunities;
- Barriers to economic diversification;

- Workforce and skills constraints;
- Advocacy priorities and leverage points; and
- Governance, capability and alignment considerations.

Workshop discussions validated survey findings, tested assumptions and provided deeper contextual insights based on Committee members' regional knowledge and experience.

2.3 Regional Engagement Activities

Targeted engagement with community leaders, local councils, land councils, industry bodies and service providers provided additional place-based intelligence. These conversations added nuance to survey data and highlighted region-specific dynamics, priorities and capacity constraints.

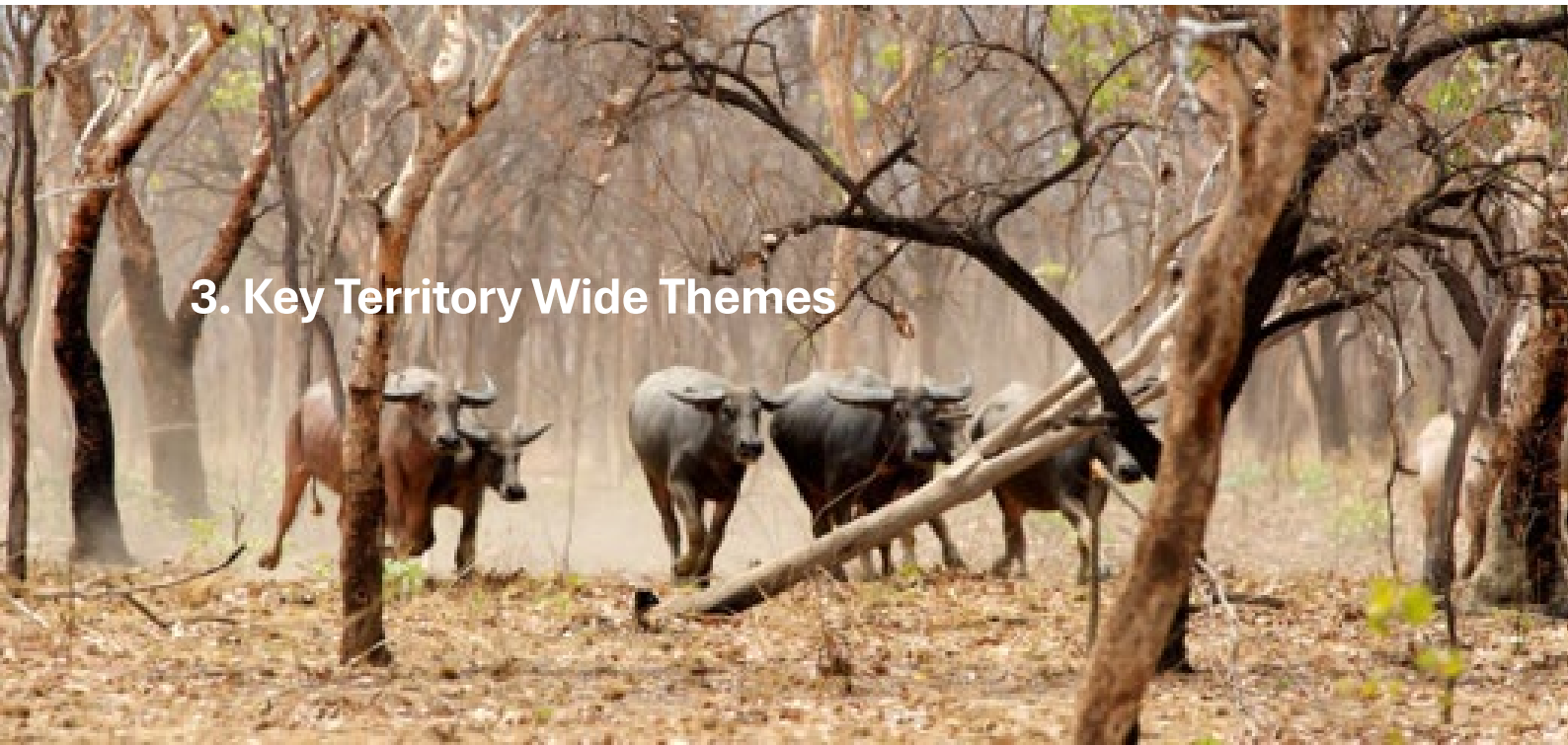
2.4 Economic and Demographic Data Review

External data sources were reviewed to complement qualitative findings, including:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics population and labour force data;
- Regional economic profiles and modelling;
- Infrastructure planning documents;
- Industry growth forecasts; and
- Social determinants of liveability indicators.

This triangulated approach ensured a balanced, evidence-led interpretation of Territory-wide and regional trends.

3. Key Territory Wide Themes



Across survey responses, workshops and engagement activities, five major themes emerged consistently. These themes reflect systemic and structural factors shaping regional development outcomes across the Northern Territory.

3.1 Liveability Pressures

Stakeholders consistently identified liveability as a foundational requirement for regional growth. Key issues included housing shortages (particularly for service workers), limited access to essential services such as health care, childcare and aged care, gaps in community infrastructure, and rising costs of living driven by freight, utilities and supply chain constraints.

Liveability challenges were strongly linked to workforce attraction and retention, population stability, investment confidence and broader social wellbeing.

3.2 Workforce Shortages and Skills Mismatch

Respondents reported persistent difficulties attracting, training and retaining skilled workers across multiple sectors. Contributing factors included limited local training pathways, misalignment between training programs and employer needs, accommodation shortages for workers, and insufficient wraparound services such as schools and childcare.

In some regions, employers reported vacancies remaining unfilled for more than 12 months, constraining service delivery and economic activity.

3.3 Investment Readiness Gaps

Strong demand was identified for early-stage project support, including feasibility studies, business cases, economic modelling and guidance on funding pathways. Many stakeholders highlighted difficulties navigating complex grant processes and meeting compliance requirements, particularly with limited local capacity.

There was broad support for a Territory-wide funding pipeline, capability-building workshops and practical tools to improve project readiness.

3.4 Connectivity Challenges


Connectivity was consistently raised as a critical enabler of development. Stakeholders identified unreliable digital connectivity, transport constraints (including seasonal road access), high freight costs and energy reliability issues as barriers to economic growth, service delivery and workforce mobility.

These challenges directly affect emerging sectors such as renewable energy, critical minerals, agribusiness and tourism.

3.5 Strong Appetite for First Nations-Led Development

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of Indigenous-led economic development, grounded in local decision-making, cultural knowledge and caring for Country. There was strong support for long-term capability building, respectful partnerships and governance models aligned with UNDRIP and Free, Prior and Informed Consent principles.

This approach was viewed as both an ethical imperative and a practical driver of sustainable regional development.

A scenic view of a lake with a boat in the distance and trees in the foreground. The sky is blue with some clouds, and the water is calm. The boat is white and has a canopy. There are people on the boat. The trees in the foreground are dark and silhouetted against the sky.

4. Regional Strengths and Opportunities

Despite differing regional contexts and challenges, stakeholders consistently identified a range of strengths and opportunity areas that provide a strong foundation for long-term economic and social development across the Northern Territory.

Across regions, stakeholders highlighted the Territory's **natural and cultural assets** as a defining competitive advantage. These assets underpin opportunities in tourism, conservation, land management, carbon and nature-based markets, arts and cultural enterprises, and Indigenous-led economic development. Many respondents emphasised that these strengths are globally significant but remain under-leveraged without coordinated investment, infrastructure and workforce support.

Emerging and transitioning industries were also identified as key growth opportunities. These include renewable energy and hydrogen, critical minerals, agribusiness and value-added food production, aquaculture, defence-related industries and circular economy initiatives. Stakeholders noted that while investor interest is growing, regions require stronger project readiness, infrastructure certainty and workforce pipelines to convert interest into sustained economic outcomes.

Stakeholders also pointed to **strong community identity and leadership** across regions as a major asset. Local leadership networks, Aboriginal corporations, councils, not-for-profits and industry groups were seen as critical enablers of place-based development when supported with the right data, capability and partnerships.

Importantly, many regions expressed a growing willingness to collaborate across sectors and jurisdictions, recognising that shared challenges such as housing, workforce and connectivity cannot be addressed in isolation. This presents an opportunity for RDA NT to play a stronger coordinating and facilitative role.

5. Regional Challenges

While the Northern Territory's regions offer significant opportunity, stakeholders consistently identified a set of persistent and interrelated challenges that continue to constrain regional growth and resilience.

Housing

Housing was identified as a critical pressure point across almost all regions. Stakeholders reported limited availability of rental and service worker accommodation, high construction and materials costs, slow planning and approvals processes, and insufficient incentives to attract private development. Housing shortages were consistently linked to workforce attraction and retention challenges and reduced service cap

Workforce

High workforce turnover, small local labour pools and limited access to regionally relevant training pathways were reported as ongoing constraints. Stakeholders emphasised that workforce challenges are compounded by housing shortages, cost-of-living pressures and limited access to education, childcare and health services.

Cost of Doing Business

Businesses across regions reported high operating costs, including insurance, freight and logistics, utilities and limited competition in essential services. These costs disproportionately affect small and remote businesses and reduce investment viability.

Service Access

Limited access to essential services remains a major concern, particularly in remote and regional areas. Stakeholders highlighted long wait times for health and mental health services, aged care, disability services and childcare, alongside difficulties attracting visiting specialists and maintaining service continuity.

Early-Stage Funding and Capability

Many regions lack the local capability and resourcing required to progress projects beyond concept stage. Stakeholders reported over-reliance on external consultants, misalignment between project development timelines and funding cycles, and challenges meeting compliance and reporting requirements.



6. Priority Areas for Advocacy


Stakeholders identified several priority areas where coordinated, evidence-led advocacy would have the greatest impact on regional development outcomes across the Northern Territory.

These priorities reflect issues that are largely systemic in nature and require alignment across Commonwealth, Territory and local governments.

Key advocacy priorities include:

1. Increasing housing supply and affordability, particularly for service workers and essential staff.
2. Upgrading and maintaining regional road networks and critical transport corridors.
3. Improving digital connectivity, telecommunications resilience and access to reliable broadband.
4. Strengthening workforce pathways, training investment and regional incentives.
5. Improving access to early-stage project funding and feasibility support.
6. Expanding access to essential services, including health, aged care, childcare and disability services.
7. Supporting First Nations-led economic development and long-term capability building.
8. Ensuring energy reliability and planning for future renewable integration.

Stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of advocacy that is coordinated, evidence-based and grounded in regional realities. These priorities align strongly with RDA NT's Strategic Plan goals and reinforce RDA NT's role as a Territory-wide advocate and convenor.



7. Findings by Strategic Goal

Stakeholder feedback strongly reinforced the relevance and appropriateness of RDA NT's five Strategic Plan goals. Across survey responses, workshops and engagement activities, there was clear support for RDA NT's role in coordination, facilitation and evidence-led advocacy.

Goal 1 – Drive Coordinated Advocacy and Regional Intelligence

Stakeholders want RDA NT to act as a Territory-wide advocate that elevates local priorities through credible data and regional intelligence. Respondents supported regular Regional Insights Reports, improved access to data, and stronger convening of partners around shared priorities.

Goal 2 – Liveability Framework

There was strong support for the development of a Territory-wide Liveability Framework to consistently measure and communicate liveability challenges and strengths. Stakeholders noted that such a framework would support population attraction strategies, workforce retention and more targeted investment decisions.

Goal 3 – Increase Regional Investment and Capacity

Stakeholders widely endorsed the establishment of a Funding Enablement Framework, practical project development tools and clearer investment pathways. Improved transparency and support at early project stages were seen as critical to unlocking regional investment.

The Regional Investment Readiness and Impact Fund (RIRIF), launched in April 2026, is a key delivery mechanism for this goal, supporting last-mile planning and enabling activities that move regional projects from concept to investment-ready status in line with the Strategic Plan 2026–2029.

Goal 4 – Strengthen Coordination for Workforce and Skills Development

Respondents called for localised, employer-aligned training pathways, stronger school-to-work transitions and incentives to attract and retain workers. Better coordination between governments, industry and training providers was seen as essential.

Goal 5 – Strengthen Governance, Capability and Visibility

Stakeholders reinforced that RDA NT is most effective when it remains neutral, evidence-led and collaborative. Improved visibility, clarity of purpose and transparent impact reporting were identified as important to maintaining trust and influence.

8. Regional Differences

While Territory-wide themes were consistent, stakeholders highlighted distinct regional priorities reflecting local contexts, industry bases and community needs.

Central Australia

Stakeholders in Central Australia emphasised tourism recovery, arts and cultural industries, renewable energy opportunities, housing availability and youth services. Liveability, community safety and service access were identified as critical to population retention.

Big Rivers

In the Big Rivers region, priorities included agribusiness expansion, improved transport links, export opportunities, labour supply and access to community services. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of freight efficiency and workforce housing.

Barkly

Barkly stakeholders reported extreme service access challenges, high logistics and freight costs, housing shortages and limited local training pathways. Improved connectivity and long-term service sustainability were identified as urgent needs.

East Arnhem

East Arnhem respondents highlighted cultural leadership, Indigenous governance, digital connectivity, community infrastructure and pathways for young people. There was strong emphasis on Indigenous-led development and local decision-making.

West Arnhem

Stakeholders in West Arnhem raised concerns around service reliability, transport constraints and the need for greater economic diversification to support local employment and resilience.

Greater Darwin Region

In the Darwin region, housing affordability, workforce supply, skills shortages and pressure on essential services were dominant themes. Stakeholders also noted opportunities to leverage Darwin's role as a service and logistics hub for the broader Territory.





9. Conclusion

This Regional Insights Report provides a comprehensive, evidence-led assessment of the opportunities, challenges and development priorities shaping the Northern Territory's regions.

The findings validate RDA NT's strategic focus on coordinated advocacy, liveability, investment readiness, workforce development and organisational capability. They also reinforce that effective regional development in the NT must be place-based, culturally informed and grounded in strong partnerships between government, industry, First Nations organisations and communities.

Importantly, the insights highlight that many of the challenges facing regions are interconnected and systemic, requiring long-term, coordinated responses rather than short-term or siloed interventions. RDA NT's role as a Territory-wide connector, convenor and evidence provider is therefore critical to improving outcomes.

These insights will continue to guide RDA NT in shaping advocacy priorities, supporting regional capability building and enabling strategic investment decisions that strengthen liveability, resilience and economic opportunity across the Northern Territory, including through implementation of the Strategic Plan 2026–2029, the Interim Implementation Plan and the Regional Investment Readiness and Impact Fund.



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