



Parliamentary Joint
Standing Committee on
Northern Australia:
Preparing for Emerging
Industries across Northern
Australia

December 2025



Response

Charters Towers sits at the heart of North Queensland's inland economy. Our region's strengths, which include mining and critical minerals, agriculture, heritage tourism, education and training, and emerging clean-energy opportunities, are recognised across a suite of Council strategies, including the *Community Strategic Plan 2025–2035*, *Economic Development Strategy 2025–2030*, *Workforce Strategy Plan*, and the *Biosecurity Plan 2025–2029*. These documents collectively lay out the local priorities, infrastructure needs, partnership models, and workforce pathways necessary to unlock new industry growth while ensuring resilience and inclusion for all communities.

This submission responds to each Term of Reference, drawing specific examples and data points from Council's own plans and programs, and situating them in the broader national policy context of the Committee's inquiry and the Government's net zero, resources, and Northern Australia frameworks.

The global transition to net zero and furthering renewable energy, decarbonisation and carbon abatement

Charters Towers Regional Council supports the national transition to net zero and recognises the opportunities for renewable energy and decarbonisation across Northern Australia (Australian Government, 2025). Council is concerned however with ongoing policy shifts which have the potential to have significant financial impacts on local councils as those closest to the service deliverables required.

Charters Towers Regional Council has identified renewable energy development and decarbonisation as core regional opportunities in its *Economic Development Strategy 2025–2030*, alongside mining, tourism, and agricultural diversification. The Strategy sets out infrastructure investment and planning as a key focus area, expressly to enable new energy industries and industrial loads to connect efficiently, and it commits Council to advocacy and collaboration that bring enabling infrastructure forward (Charters Towers Regional Council, 2025).

Our *Community Strategic Plan 2025–2035* highlights the Upper Burdekin River's hydrological potential and the presence of up to 70,000 hectares of good quality agricultural land in the catchment, noting opportunities for water security, pumped-hydro concepts, and sustainable industry on existing corridors. These are opportunities that can anchor firm renewables and distributed microgrids across the inland. Building on these local strengths, we support alignment with the Australian Government's Net Zero Plan and sector plans (electricity and energy; industry; agriculture and land), which prioritise clean electricity, electrification, clean fuels, accelerating new technologies, and scaled carbon removals (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 2025). For Charters Towers, this translates into practical initiatives such as behind the meter solar and storage on Council facilities, electrification pilots in industrial precincts, and savanna burning/carbon land management partnerships that create employment for Indigenous ranger groups.

To ensure climate action connects to Reef outcomes, we note Council joined the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Reef Guardian Councils in October 2024 (Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2024). Although Charters Towers is inland, our catchments feed the Reef, and Council has committed to projects that reduce sediment run off, improve habitat, and support clean energy upgrades, thus contributing to climate resilience and waterway health.

However, Council has significant concerns about the infrastructure pressures created by this transition, particularly the increased movement of oversize overmass (OSOM) vehicles linked to renewable energy projects, transmission line construction, and critical minerals development. The impact of OSOM vehicles on local roads and the need for funding options of local government has long been recognised (WSP, 2018).

These vehicles impose substantial strain on local roads that were not designed for such loads, accelerating pavement deterioration and increasing maintenance costs. Council's current road

maintenance budget cannot absorb these impacts without additional funding support from State and Federal Governments. Without targeted investment, the condition of local roads will decline, affecting safety and reliability for all users.

Council is also concerned about recent decisions by the Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR) to discourage OSOM access to the Macrossan Bridge, citing its status as “vulnerable infrastructure”, and instead divert these vehicles via Hervey Range Road. While we acknowledge the need to protect key assets, this diversion appears to have been made without transparent consultation or adequate consideration of the topography and engineering constraints of Hervey Range Road, nor the downstream impacts on local roads and communities. These decisions increase travel distances, impose additional wear on alternative routes, and create safety risks on steep gradients among other matters.

Further, given the criticality of Macrossan Bridge as a key link in the east-west corridor (Queensland Reconstruction Authority, 2022), Council have on many occasions, requested access to reports or information that would prevent OSOM vehicles from accessing Macrossan Bridge, however to this point TMR have refused to provide such information.

Council believes such routing decisions should be made collaboratively and transparently, with local governments at the table to ensure impacts on regional infrastructure are fully assessed and mitigated. We recommend the Committee support a governance framework that mandates consultation with affected councils and provides dedicated funding streams for OSOM route upgrades and maintenance, tied to emerging industry development.

Developing the critical minerals industry

Council's Economic Development Strategy explicitly identifies expansion in mining and critical minerals as a major regional opportunity and commits Council to infrastructure planning and investment attraction to support this growth (Charters Towers Regional Council, 2025).

Charters Towers has experienced a substantial surge in gold and rare earth activity throughout 2024–2025, with Council working proactively to accommodate and support this rapid growth. Sunshine Metals for example has accelerated its exploration and development agenda; particularly at its Ravenswood Consolidated Project (Sunshine Metals, 2025), near Charters Towers, highlighted by final diamond drill results (4.5 m @ 17.23 g/t Au) from its Sybil target in October 2025 (Sunshine Metals, 2025) and approximately \$5 million in new funding, including a \$1 million equity investment by Lion Selection (Sunshine Metals, 2025). The June 2025 ASX Quarterly Report confirms activities at Lione town, Tigertown, and Mt Pleasant, with assays returning 22.82 g/t Au and rock chips up to 64.5 g/t Au, underpinning resource growth (Sunshine Metals, 2025). A November 2024 metallurgical study further reinforced the project's viability, with exceptional gold recoveries of 99.4 % (Sunshine Metals, 2024).

As this activity ramps up, Council is actively managing considerable infrastructure impacts by negotiating multiple Road Use Agreements (RUA) to regulate the impact of increased heavy vehicle movements across the 167 km urban and 4,070 km rural network. These agreements are essential to protect Council's roads and heritage assets that face excessive damage due to heavy load corridors tied to mineral transport. In accordance with best practices, Council is documenting pavement conditions, defining allowable routes, and establishing maintenance obligations within RUAs. These are time consuming and costly agreements essential to ensure shared financial responsibility for local road maintenance and management.

In 2025, Native Mineral Resources (NMR) restarted gold production at the Blackjack Processing Plant in Charters Towers, achieving first gold in July 2025 and reporting cash receipts from gold sales by September 2025 (Native Mineral Resources, 2025), demonstrating local processing capability and supply chain depth. NMR's March 2025 ASX update detailed refurbishment progress, statutory compliance, tailings storage facility design work, and recruitment underway for a Q3 2025 restart (Native Mineral Resources, 2025), underscoring the region's capacity to progress projects from planning to operations within single year timelines.

Beyond gold, our metallogenic setting includes significant copper and base metals. In 2025, Loyal Metals publicised an option over the Highway Reward copper-gold mine (Hadrian, 2025), located

approximately 37 km south of Charters Towers, citing historical high grade production and proximity to Townsville and major processing hubs; evidence of renewed investor interest around our mining district (Hadrian, 2025). At the provincial scale, Queensland's *Critical Minerals Prospectus* (2025) identifies investment ready projects and fast tracking approvals as Government priorities (Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development, 2025). The report, and early exploration, identify possible loads of lithium, cobalt, vanadium and titanium in pegmatite dykes (Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development, 2025) (CitiGold Corporation Limited, 2024) may well exist in viable quantities in the Charters Towers local government area. Charters Towers is therefore well placed to host mid stream services (maintenance, labs, logistics) and, where commercially viable, selected downstream processing pathways that complement our existing plant capacity.

The boost in exploration, especially rare earths, highlights Charters Towers' potential as a hub for mid stream processing, analytical services, and sample processing, hosted within the existing Industrial Precinct. These services offer faster exploration to production timelines and leverage proximity to Townsville and regional infrastructure. Nevertheless, Council emphasises it cannot bear the heavy vehicle infrastructure upgrade burden alone. We recommend cost-sharing grants between State and Federal Governments for pavement strengthening, load capacity upgrades, and intersection enhancements on all RUA designated routes and State owned road infrastructure.

Supporting the Development of Export Industries

Council's *Economic Development Strategy 2025-2030* positions Charters Towers as a “premier service hub for the North West”, emphasising regional collaboration and advocacy to improve freight and logistics (Charters Towers Regional Council, 2025). A concrete example is the Charters Towers Industrial Precinct Access project, currently in planning with \$4 million committed by the Australian Government, which will deliver intersection upgrades enabling triple road train access on the Flinders Highway (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts, 2025). This will improve safety, efficiency, and network reliability for heavy vehicles carrying minerals, agricultural products, and equipment. Planning work led by Council is expected to be completed by late 2025 (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts, 2025), after which delivery steps will be confirmed.

At a regional scale, the CopperString transmission initiative, linking Townsville to the North West, will reshape energy economics for exporters and processors. While CopperString's scope and timelines have evolved (PowerLink Queensland, 2025), the eastern link is being prioritised for delivery from Hughenden toward Townsville, with early works and workforce accommodation underway (Barton, 2024). This grid connection is central to unlocking lower cost, cleaner power for minerals processing and export oriented industries serviced through our road and rail corridors to Townsville.

Charters Towers Regional Council therefore supports a diversified export strategy that encompasses minerals, livestock, and emerging horticultural opportunities. While live cattle exports from the Dalrymple Saleyards declined after the opening of the Reid River depot in 2023, the yards remain operational and key to regional trade. As of October–November 2025, weekly yardings ranged from 1,500 to 3,200 cattle (Meat & Livestock Australia, 2025), with live export consignments still loading via Darwin and Townsville, demonstrating the continuing strategic importance of Charters Towers freight routes.

The establishment of the Reid River depot, capable of handling 13,500 head, shifted volume away from the Dalrymple Saleyards. However, 80% of cattle at Reid River continue to travel via Charters Towers road networks (LiveCorp, 2022), highlighting the LGA's enduring role in cattle logistics.

Meanwhile, as noted above, the minerals export sector is gaining renewed momentum.

Council has recently seen renewed interest in horticultural investment. The Mount Isa to Townsville Economic Zone (MITEZ) and Council are promoting irrigated cropping opportunities along the Burdekin River, suggesting potential future development of potatoes, beans, citrus,

peanuts, melons, grapes, and stock fodder in the Charters Towers region (Graham, 2021). Council views this as a viable diversification pathway, but confirms that infrastructure like water harvesting, cold storage, packaging, and transport links would be required to support export readiness.

Supporting the Decommissioning Industry

Northern Australia will see growing demand for decommissioning across mining, energy, and legacy industrial assets. Charters Towers can contribute to this emerging industry via our industrial precincts, road train access, and inland lay down areas suited to dismantling and recycling operations, while meeting environmental and biosecurity standards.

Charters Towers Regional Council shares the national ambition for renewable energy and decommissioning, yet we have serious concerns about this industry's environmental and infrastructure impacts (Varbanov, 2023). As wind farms and solar installations reach end of life, blades and panels often lack recyclability options (Molina, 2025). Current practices commonly involve sending composite materials to local landfills, even though these materials pose long term environmental risks such as leaching, instability, and space constraints (Varbanov, 2023). They will therefore severely impact the landfill capacity of local governments, particularly given the majority of these installations are in rural and remote Council areas.

Between 2025 and 2030, global forecasts estimate up to 94% of turbine mass is recyclable, but rotor blades and PV panels often cannot be recovered economically and are diverted to landfill (Varbanov, 2023). With non-existent facilities in Charters Towers for composite recycling, retired renewable infrastructure may exacerbate demands on Council's existing 76,000 m³ landfill capacity, which was originally designed for domestic and industrial waste only. Council is deeply concerned about potential toxic leachate, microplastics, and diminished airspace (Varbanov, 2023) if decommissioned blades and PV panels begin accumulating locally.

It should be noted however that, as noted several times above, Charters Towers remains a vital freight hub within the national Key Freight Network, strategically positioned at the junction of both the north-south, Inland Freight Route (from Mungindi to Cairns) and east-west (Flinders Highway) corridors. The decommissioning sector is therefore expected to have unique impacts on the Charters Towers local government area as the heavy lifting of this freight task will again be borne by the Charters Towers region.

Supporting the Defence Industry

Charters Towers hosts a substantial Defence footprint that is strategically important to Australia's preparedness and alliance commitments. Within our Local Government Area (LGA), Defence lands total approximately 535,000 hectares across the Townsville Field Training Area (including High Range and the former Dotswood Station), Macrossan Camp, and the Greenvale Training Area reserved for the Australian–Singapore Military Training Initiative (ASMTI). This footprint represents about 8% of the LGA's land area and more than 9% of regional grazing land (Kelly & Butler, 2025) and has been progressively assembled since the 1940s to support ADF training, joint exercises, and allied force integration.

The economic presence of Defence in Charters Towers is twofold. First, at a macro level, the Defence estate and training tempo deliver national benefits in preparedness and interoperability (including prospective ASMTI outcomes). Second, at a local level, the opportunity costs borne by our community: principally foregone agricultural production, mineral exploration constraints, and rate revenue exemptions, are material and must be acknowledged and addressed through partnership investment (Kelly & Butler, 2025). Council's commissioned Economic Impacts of Defence Land Resumptions study is attached to this response for information. It estimates that, had the resumed lands remained in productive agricultural use, the Charters Towers economy would generate \$15.0 million in Gross Regional Product (GRP), \$4.0 million in wages and salaries, and around 64 FTE jobs each year, with a discounted 20 year Net Present Value (NPV) of more than \$200 million in foregone Gross Regional Product (GRP). These figures are concentrated in agriculture but ripple into manufacturing, transport and retail, shaping community viability (e.g., school enrolments, service thresholds) (Kelly & Butler, 2025).

Council's position is therefore pro-Defence and pro-community. Council want Defence to succeed in its mission here, and we want the local economy and communities to succeed alongside it. To that end, we propose four practical commitments to strengthen Defence / community outcomes in Charters Towers:

1. **A Defence and Council Infrastructure Compact for Charters Towers.** Create a co-funded compact that invests in the north–south and east–west freight hub functions Charters Towers performs (Flinders Highway, Gregory Developmental Road, inland freight links). This compact should prioritise heavy vehicle route upgrades, intersection improvements and pavement strengthening to manage current Defence logistics and future movements. Infrastructure Australia recognises the Charters Towers–Mungindi Inland Freight Route as a nationally significant corridor needing capacity, safety and flood resilience upgrades; the compact would accelerate those works in our LGA.
2. **Transparent land use and exercise scheduling with community safeguards.** Council seeks clear, advance scheduling for high tempo exercises, jointly assessed for road safety, noise, dust, and emergency access, with published environmental management plans and community hotlines during exercises. This is particularly important where training periods intersect with seasonal agricultural operations, school calendars, or local events, and where unexploded ordnance (UXO) risk constrains exploration or grazing practices within or adjacent to training areas.
3. **Local procurement and workforce pathways.** Increase local procurement from Charters Towers businesses (civil works, maintenance, accommodation, catering, logistics) and develop joint training pathways with local providers (e.g., Dalrymple Trade Training Centre/TAFE Queensland) to place more Charters Towers residents into Defence sustainment, transport, environmental services, and site operations roles. This will help shift Defence activity from being largely non-resident (as the 2021 Census showed) (Kelly & Butler, 2025) towards a stronger local employment presence over time.

In parallel, Council requests structured engagement on ASMTI and any future expansions: we support the strategic rationale and regional opportunities but require co-designed benefit frameworks, including infrastructure funding, local procurement targets, environmental safeguards, and community impact mitigation, to ensure the net effect is positive and enduring for Charters Towers. The Council study confirms the scale of foregone local benefits from past resummptions and highlights the need for equity and transparency as new Defence investments come forward.

Finally, because Charters Towers is a primary inland transport hub, we reiterate the need for continued investment in our roads and freight links to safely and efficiently support Defence logistics, allied exercises, and the broader regional economy (beef, minerals, horticulture). Aligning Defence estate operations with a multi-modal, climate resilient infrastructure program will reduce whole of system costs for Defence and deliver co-benefits to local industry and communities: exactly the type of shared value envisaged in Defence's energy and sustainability strategies (Department of Defence, 2024).

Supporting Infrastructure

Infrastructure is the backbone of Charters Towers' economy and liveability, but the financial sustainability of council owned networks is under severe strain. Charters Towers Regional Council is responsible for approximately 4,070 km of rural roads (mostly unsealed) and 167 km of urban roads, plus associated footpaths, kerbs and heritage stone works. This is an asset base far larger than can be sustainably maintained from local rates alone and one that is increasingly supporting the national freight task as discussed above. The sheer scale of this network, combined with repeated severe weather damage and heavy vehicle loads, has outpaced our renewal and maintenance budgets.

Independent analysis by the Grattan Institute confirmed local roads across regional Australia are a "dangerous disgrace" after consecutive wet years. The report recommended an extra \$1 billion per year for councils (\$600 million via untied Financial Assistance Grants (FA Grants) and \$400 million via Roads to Recovery (R2R)) to be indexed and better targeted to councils with large

networks and limited revenue bases (Terrill, Bradshaw, & Jones, 2023). The report also argues for a national road hierarchy, minimum service standards, and simpler grant rules, so funding reaches places of greatest need without onerous red tape (Terrill, Bradshaw, & Jones, 2023). Those recommendations mirror what we see on the ground in Charters Towers: untied, predictable funding must rise and be directed to councils managing vast networks per ratepayer, not just to populous cities.

The funding gap is not confined to roads. Council faces backlogs in community infrastructure including public pools, parks and open spaces that underpin health, inclusion and tourism. The scale of assets under management in Charters Towers is echoed by most rural and regional councils (209 hectares of open space, 23 sports fields (~49 hectares), 25 parks, 11 playgrounds and nine cemeteries (Charters Towers Regional Council, 2022)). Those numbers do not include the aerodromes, landfills, water and wastewater treatment plants etc, etc; all requiring sustained renewal and maintenance to the standards expected by the community and relevant regulation. In recent budgets Council has had to prioritise only critical upgrades (e.g., Kennedy Regiment Memorial Pool redevelopment, cemetery works and water reticulation improvements), while deferring desirable enhancements because external co-funding is scarce and competitive. This backlog has accumulated over years of under investment by higher tiers of government relative to the rising costs and expectations placed on local government.

Current Commonwealth arrangements provide helpful building blocks but are insufficient and uneven for councils like ours. While the FA Grants program will deliver over \$3.4 billion nationally in 2025–26 and remains untied (general purpose + identified local roads components), the real value of FA Grants has fallen over time and distribution rules do not adequately reflect extreme network scale per resident. In 2025–26 the published FA Grant entitlement for Charters Towers Regional Council totals \$13.24 million (early + cash payments), but even this quantum cannot keep pace with heavy vehicle wear, climate impacts and renewal needs across a 4,000 plus km rural network. In parallel, disaster recovery support through the Disaster Relief Funding Arrangements (DRFA) has rightly advanced payments to repair flood, fire and cyclone damage, yet DRFA is episodic by design and cannot substitute for baseline, indexed maintenance funding.

Council is grateful the federal government has renewed its inquiry into local government financial sustainability (following its February 2025 interim report) and is taking evidence on funding mechanisms, fiscal sustainability and barriers to infrastructure delivery, particularly for smaller and regional councils. This review provides a timely opportunity to reset intergovernmental funding so councils can maintain essential infrastructure without chronic deficits or service cuts. The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) has likewise highlighted that FA Grants have halved as a share of Commonwealth tax revenue since 1996 (from ~1% to ~0.5%), and is advocating for new, formula based untied streams for enabling infrastructure (housing), community infrastructure, safer local roads, emergency management capability and climate adaptation (Australian Local Government Association, 2025). Independent research for ALGA further shows many councils cannot raise enough own source revenue to meet operating costs and warns that rising tied and competitive grants reduce councils' ability to align spending with local priorities (Spiller, 2024).

Recommendations

1. Increase FAGs toward 1% of Commonwealth tax revenue, with explicit loadings for councils managing large road kilometres per resident and high heavy vehicle intensity. Index these grants robustly (CPI + population) and reduce Treasurer discretion on indexation pauses, to prevent real terms erosion.
2. Lift R2R funding consistent with Grattan's +\$400 million recommendation, simplify compliance (e.g., signage requirements, six month spend down rules), and allow multi-year programming so councils can bundle renewals efficiently.
3. Establish a dedicated fund for heavy vehicle corridors and first/last mile freight links across Northern Australia, focusing on pavement strengthening, intersections and floodways that councils like Charters Towers cannot finance alone. Align this with Infrastructure Australia's Inland Freight Route priorities to enhance capacity, safety and resilience.

4. Provide untied, formula based capital grants to address backlogs in pools, parks, sports fields and open space amenities that councils manage but cannot renew at reasonable intervals, especially where assets support health, tourism and regional events. Use Council inventories and service standards to determine equitable, needs based allocations.
5. Reduce the proportion of tied, short deadline grants; adopt national road hierarchy and minimum service standards; and invest in asset data capability so councils can report condition and renewal needs consistently. This will improve accountability while letting councils focus funds on highest local priorities, as the Grattan report proposes.
6. Maintain DRFA's role for extreme events but complement it with permanent resilience allocations that fund drainage, floodways and climate proof design, avoiding cost blowouts from deferred maintenance after successive disasters.

With these changes, councils like Charters Towers can sustain the core networks and community assets that national productivity depends on. The renewed federal inquiry offers a critical chance to modernise local government funding, address structural under investment, and ensure the important infrastructure councils provide is safe, reliable, and fit for future growth.

Managing Biosecurity Risks

Charters Towers Regional Council recognises that while State governments in Queensland have recently scaled back biosecurity management activities such as 1080 wild dog baiting services, councils are increasingly expected to step in or scale up such programs. Isaac Regional Council's cancellation of its first 1080 baiting round in March 2025, due to staffing gaps, highlights this trend and the pressure on councils to fill these roles with limited resources (Isaac Regional Council, 2025).

Federal initiatives offer some relief but leave gaps. The Supporting Communities Manage Pest Animals and Weeds Program (2021–22 to 2024–25, extended in 2025–26) provides \$60 million in matched funding to councils, First Nations ranger groups, and Natural Resource Management (NRM) organisations for feral dog/pig/fox control (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2025). Meanwhile, a “Communities Combating Pest and Weed Impacts During Drought” program ran from 2020 to 2021, channelling \$10–15 million to support drought impacted councils and farmers. However, Charters Towers and neighbouring LGAs must now self fund baseline 1080 programs, including carcass collection and disposal: services previously coordinated by the State, at significant annual cost.

Under the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity and the National Biosecurity Strategy 2024, the Commonwealth is increasingly expecting local councils to undertake surveillance, response, and community engagement activities (Biosecurity Australia, 2022). ALGA estimates that councils are responsible for \$6.75 billion spent on biosecurity, biodiversity, and water in 2021–22 which is an amount greater than State contributions (Australian Local Government Association, 2024), yet Councils have limited access to federal funds to cover these roles.

Charters Towers Regional Council also highlights the importance of consistent stock standstill regulations in potential disease outbreaks. Under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, a national standstill may be enforced and local councils are required to ensure compliance at saleyards, transport hubs, and community levels. In Victoria, a standstill triggers immediate movement bans unless permitted, implying similar requirements for Charters Towers. Research by CSIRO demonstrates that a 3 day national standstill effectively reduces disease spread, but also causes significant economic disruption unless managed with clear local protocols (Seitzinger, Garner, Bradhurst, Okelo, & Rodan, 2022).

To support compliance and community protection, Council recommends the Committee advocate for:

1. Stabilised, untied Commonwealth funding via Financial Assistance Grants (FAGs) or a new “Local Biosecurity Support Fund.” This should enable councils to deliver biosecurity management measures such as 1080 baiting, weed seed suppression, livestock standstill enforcement, and surveillance without dependence on state budgets or episodic grants.

2. Targeted assistance for biosecurity service delivery in Northern councils through initiatives like the Northern Australia Biosecurity Framework Reference Group, involving ranger based surveillance and community education activities.
3. Clear, nationally consistent standards and protocols, setting minimum service levels for invasive species control (e.g., minimum bait density), stock standstill procedures, and saleyard hygiene.
4. Emergency preparedness triggers and mechanisms that define council contributions during Foot and Mouth Disease, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, or other exotic disease emergencies, so councils are not left to carry compliance and biosecurity costs unaided.
5. Data sharing, digital traceability support, and training to allow local officers to access real time National Livestock Identification System stock movement data, joint training with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and access to community targeted education materials.

By clarifying expectations of council roles under national frameworks, and pairing those expectations with regular, formula based funding, Charters Towers can fulfill its biosecurity obligations, respond promptly to invasive threats, safeguard the export economy and regional cattle industry, and protect First Nations lands and rural livelihoods. This shift aligns with Councils' increasing responsibilities and supports a world class Australian biosecurity system.

Training, Attracting and Retaining a Skilled Workforce

Charters Towers Regional Council recognises the challenges of attracting, training, and retaining a skilled workforce in rural and remote areas. To maintain essential services including clean energy operations, critical minerals processing, biosecurity, and defence logistics, councils must recruit from broader labour pools and offer strong career pathways.

Under the refreshed Northern Australia agenda, updated in August 2024, the Federal Government identified human capital, particularly workforce skills, training, housing, mobility, and First Nations participation, as a top policy priority (Parliament of Australia, 2024). This aligns with the current Northern Australia Action Plan 2024–2029, enhancing Indigenous economic participation and providing access to low-carbon jobs (Office of Northern Australia, 2024).

Charters Towers is a major education hub for inland Queensland, serving students from surrounding rural communities and boarding populations. Despite this, the region does not yet have a Country University Centre (CUC). This type of university hub is a proven model that provides local students with access to tertiary study facilities, high speed internet, and academic support without leaving their community. Federal investment in CUCs has shown strong outcomes elsewhere: retention rates of up to 70% of graduates remaining in their region, and significant participation by first-generation and First Nations students (Gilpin, 2025). Council is actively advocating for a CUC in Charters Towers to leverage our proximity to Townsville and our role as an education centre for North and West Queensland. This facility would reduce education related outmigration, strengthen local skills pipelines, and support industries critical to Northern Australia's growth..

Recommendations

1. Secure multi-year Commonwealth funding for the Charters Towers CUC to support STEM, trades, and digital skills.
2. Streamline relocation assistance via expanded Australian Apprenticeships incentives, regional training allowances, and hardship stipends for remote placements.
3. Boost entry level workforce growth by expanding Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program trials and Indigenous Rangers programs linked to Council priorities in biosecurity, land management, and infrastructure.
4. Simplify federal workforce grant rules to allow local plans (e.g., delivery program outcomes) to drive untied funds, aligning with Standing Committee recommendations.

5. Expand health workforce support under the Rural Health Strategy, ensuring direct access for Charters Towers practitioners to Residential Incentive Grants, Rural Bonds, and placement scholarships.

In summary, a sustained focus on place based funding, stronger incentives, and institutional investment, particularly in education and training infrastructure, is essential. Charters Towers, as a regional educational hub with a large service footprint and a proximity advantage to Townsville, stands ready to partner with Commonwealth and State governments to develop a more resilient rural workforce.

Conclusion

Charters Towers Regional Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and reiterates that Northern Australia's success depends on place based solutions that recognise the unique challenges and opportunities of inland regions. Our submission demonstrates that Charters Towers is strategically positioned as a transport hub, a critical minerals growth centre, and an education and service base for rural Queensland. However, the scale of responsibilities placed on councils including managing vast road networks, biosecurity risks, workforce development, and community infrastructure, far exceeds the financial capacity of local government under current funding arrangements.

Emerging industries will only thrive if supported by transparent governance, long term infrastructure investment, and equitable funding frameworks that enable councils to deliver essential services without compromising financial sustainability. Federal leadership is vital to:

- modernise funding models for roads and community assets;
- support councils in biosecurity compliance and emergency preparedness;
- invest in education and workforce initiatives such as a Country University Centres;
- partner with councils on freight, defence, and decommissioning infrastructure; and
- ensure collaborative decision making on heavy vehicle routes and strategic corridors.

Charters Towers is prepared to work with the Commonwealth, State Government, industry, and First Nations partners to implement these recommendations. With targeted support, our region can become a national exemplar for sustainable growth in Northern Australia, delivering economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and shared prosperity for generations to come.

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