Regional Strengths and Infrastructure Gaps

Regional Analysis: Northern Territory
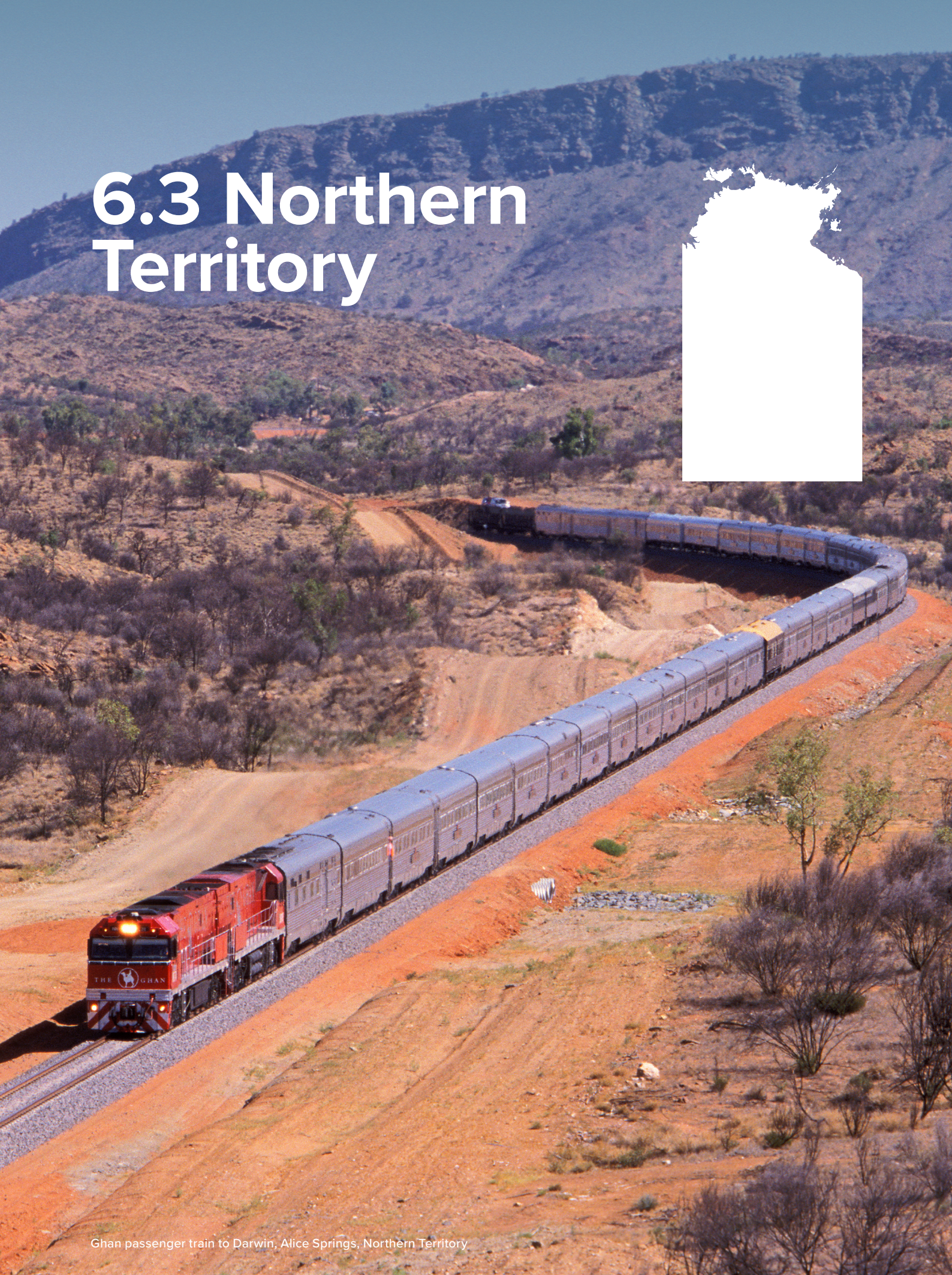
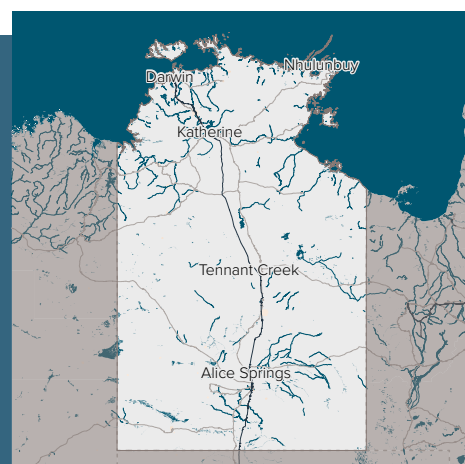Road to Uluru, Northern Territory

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6.3 Northern Territory

Ghan passenger train to Darwin, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

6.3.1 Northern Territory

The Northern Territory is large and diverse, encompassing 17.5% of Australia's land mass but only 1% of its population.[1] With a dispersed population, the identification of gaps and setting of infrastructure priorities that reflect this breadth and diversity across the Territory is particularly challenging. The *2019 Australian Infrastructure Audit*, and the *2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan* through a place-based focus on unlocking opportunity in Northern Australia and Developing Regions have further sought to capture the full breadth of issues and solutions across this region. Many of the challenges canvassed by the *2019 Audit* and the *2021 Plan* for Northern Australia are aligned with those found in this section.

The climate and unique geography in the Northern Territory, including Darwin and its connection to a backbone of centres that in turn support smaller regional communities that are predominantly First Nations people, needs to be considered when planning for infrastructure needs. The region's significant First Nations population brings a unique understanding of country, with sacred sites stretching across approximately 500 homelands[2]. From the Arrernte in Central Australia, the Yolngu in Arnhem Land to the Tiwi people of the Tiwi Islands near the Timor Sea, over 100 First Nations languages and dialects are spoken in the Northern Territory.[3]

The region has diversified from its traditional mining activities to grow its tourism, agribusiness, defence and services sectors. However, the region has experienced challenges with a continued need to improve road infrastructure, achieve better integrated infrastructure planning and digital connectivity. Improved digital and physical connectivity will be essential for enhancing liveability outcomes for residents and for efficiently moving freight across the region. There is also recognition that future growth should be cognisant of climate change, build resilience, with a focus on providing water security and addressing biosecurity risks. Providing sufficient and appropriate housing and social infrastructure and engaging with First Nations peoples are also key priorities.

The Australian Government has committed to the development of Master Plans to accelerate Regions of Growth and grow the Northern Australian Economy. Master Plans within the Northern Territory include the *Beetaloo Basin to Katherine to Darwin* growth corridor, as well as *Broome to Kununurra to Darwin* growth corridor stretching from Western Australia to the Northern Territory.[4]

Darwin, Northern Territory

Strengths

Key existing assets

Economic	**Gateway ports**	The Port of Darwin provides substantial import and export capacity, whilst airports in Darwin and in regional or remote areas provide passenger and cargo access.
	Defence assets	The Army operates from Larrakeyah and Robertson Barracks. The Navy is based at HMAS Coonawarra in the Northern Territory. The Air Force has RAAF Bases Darwin and Tindal. These assets and others are strategically significant for the nation's defence and provide economic stimulus for the region.
Natural	**Natural environments**	The region's natural environments are world-renowned and include Kakadu, Uluru, Kata Tjuta and Litchfield National Parks.
	Natural resources	Natural resources include battery and high-technology related minerals, fertiliser commodities, gold, uranium, and oil and gas reserves.
Social	**Cultural heritage**	Home to a rich and diverse range of Aboriginal archaeological places, alongside sacred cultural sites which stretch across over 500 homelands.
	Education and research institutions	Universities such as Charles Darwin University and the Flinders University Northern Territory Medical Program offer significant value in research, education and health and knowledge-sector employment opportunities.

Key regional growth industries

Defence	Mining	Agriculture, forestry and fishing
With the Northern Territory's strategic location, strong defence capabilities and abundance of military bases and training facilities, there is immense opportunity for continued growth for the region's defence sector.[5] Increased defence spending dedicated to the region also adds to the industry's growth prospects.[6]	The Northern Territory's rich mineral deposits present many opportunities to engage in downstream minerals processing, adding value to traditional mining sector activities.[7] There is also potential for strengthening gas production by expanding Liquified Natural Gas export hubs and improving supply chain processes.[8]	The agricultural sector is predominantly characterised by regional beef and cattle production which made up 81% of the Northern Territory's total agricultural exports in 2018–19.[9] However, there are significant opportunities in the region's growing horticulture and aquaculture sectors, with one of the largest Australian barramundi farms now located in the Northern Territory.[10]

Infrastructure gaps

Sector:	Telecommunications
Sub-sector:	–
Infrastructure gap:	Broadband and mobile connectivity

Delivering reliable telecommunications across the Northern Territory is a significant challenge. The region's expansive land mass, sparse population and harsh weather conditions introduce logistical challenges in delivering connectivity to the 20% of the region's population who live and work in remote locations.[11] A lack of basic enabling infrastructure such as mobile towers and transmission infrastructure in these remote areas means that nearly 10% of the region's population does not have access to mobile phone services.[12] Beyond this basic infrastructure, significant opportunities exist for implementing bespoke infrastructure which targets connectivity in very remote locations.[13] The importance of digital connectivity for the region's growth is also captured in Chapter 1.4 of the *2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan* alongside reform priorities.

Internet connectivity is also an issue in remote areas of the region. In a submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, Regional Development Australia Northern Territory identifies digital connectivity challenges across the state.[14]

Beyond challenges in providing improved connectivity in regional communities, opportunities exist to leverage recent advances in Darwin's digital capacity – such as through the establishment of the Darwin Data Centre – to better support and enable economic growth in domestic and Asian markets.[15]

Key facts:

29%
of the population in the Northern Territory relies on satellite broadband, compared to 3% of the Australian population.[16]

65%
of the population in the Northern Territory have access to fibre broadband, compared to 91% of the Australian population.[17]
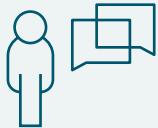
20%
of the population in the Northern Territory do not have mobile connectivity.[18]

Impact:

- Digital connectivity in regional Australia has significantly improved over recent years, however service quality, cost and reliability vary between terrestrial and satellite infrastructure services. Some services, such as e-health and remote education, may operate in reduced states or be prone to interruption using satellite connections.[19]

- Poor digital connectivity can inhibit business productivity, restricts access to markets and limits growth opportunities for businesses in remote areas.[20]

- Digital inclusion is also a significant issue in many remote First Nations communities where socioeconomic conditions preclude access to mobile plans and force reliance upon more expensive pre-paid options.[21] The National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes a target for equal levels of digital inclusion, in order to ensure First Nations communities have access to information and services.[22]

Consultation feedback:

Stakeholders considered mobile and broadband connectivity to be critical for the region. Stakeholders noted that the dispersed population in the Northern Territory has resulted in "thin markets" that have historically led to limited private sector and commercial telecommunications investment in comparison to other jurisdictions.

Beyond being an issue of basic access, stakeholders saw high-quality digital connectivity as being key to facilitating economic growth throughout the Northern Territory. In particular, improving telecommunications infrastructure was seen to be an opportunity to aid key emerging industries such as defence, agriculture, mining, space, advanced manufacturing and renewable energy.

First Nations stakeholder workshop participants also considered improved mobile and broadband connectivity to be an important issue, noting that access to digital infrastructure in remote areas is inadequate, unreliable and unaffordable. Engagement with online services – such as tele-health and remote education – is challenging as a result and this entrenches issues of inequality affecting remote, First Nations communities.

Sector:		Transport
Sub-sector:		Road infrastructure
Infrastructure gap:		Capacity, connectivity and quality of road infrastructure

With 1% of the nation's population and 17.5% of its landmass, delivering an efficient and reliable road network to serve industry, and the people of Small Towns, Rural Communities and Remote Areas in the Northern Territory is particularly challenging.[23] Safe, sealed road access underpins economic development, equity of service and access, and this is difficult in the dispersed Northern Territory with a seasonal tropical climate. Poor regional road connections inhibit access to key interstate markets and adding significant operational costs for businesses.[24] The Northern Territory has the highest annual road fatality rate in the nation – at approximately 20 people per 100,000.[25] 72.5% of fatal crashes in the region over the past decade have occurred on rural roads, highlighting the pressing need to improve the quality and safety of the Northern Territory's rural road network.[26]

As home to Australia's closest trading port to Asia, there are also export opportunities to be seized by optimising road connections for freight, particularly as demand from these markets is projected to grow.[27]Investments have been made in road infrastructure in the Northern Territory to support gas development and other industries in and around the Beetaloo Sub-basin.[28]

Refer to Chapter 1.4 and 4.2 of the *2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan* for reform priorities that address physical connectivity deficits relevant to Northern Australia, which are discussed in Chapters 3.6 and 3.7 of the *2019 Australian Infrastructure Audit*.

Key facts:

75%

of the Northern Territory road network is unsealed.[29]

Road freight costs can be

65%

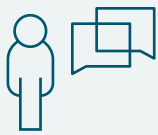higher on unsealed roads than on sealed roads.[30]

38%

of bridge structures in the region are in poor or very poor condition.[31]

Impact:

- The region's small population presents a challenge in funding road infrastructure projects as there is a small rate base, despite servicing one-sixth of Australia's land mass.[32]

- Construction, mining, manufacturing, agriculture and tourism depend on reliable and efficient road networks andcontribute over $22 billion in output to the Northern Territory economy.[33]

- Rural and remote communities of the Northern Territory can be isolated for up to 6 months at a time due to wet season rain events. The resilience of assets in this environment is limited, for example a lack of adequate bridge and drainage infrastructure over stream crossings limits the accessibility of the road network.[34]

Consultation feedback:

Road infrastructure was seen to be a pressing issue by stakeholders involved in the consultation process. Stakeholders also noted that the seasonal climate can disconnect the national highway network, major roads and remote roads, with resultant logistical challenges. Workshop attendees noted that issues with road infrastructure related not only to unsealed rural roads, but also extended to recently upgraded roads, where work had been sub-standard, or where maintenance work had not kept pace with use over time. As a result, key connector roads are quickly reaching the end of their useful lives with limited funding capacity available to address the maintenance backlog.

Participants in First Nations stakeholder workshops also raised road infrastructure as being of critical importance to the development of their regions. Inadequate transport connections inhibit economic growth in more remote areas, and act as a barrier to social connectivity and wellbeing for remote communities.

Sector:	Social infrastructure
Sub-sector:	Housing
Infrastructure gap:	Availability, affordability and diversity of housing

The Northern Territory is experiencing a housing challenge across its communities. The waiting list for public housing across urban and regional areas sits at over 3,500 applications, with wait times ranging from two to eight years.[35] This issue is compounded by an increasingly unaffordable private rental market that is inaccessible to a large proportion of the population.[36,37] A lack of public housing diversity also contributes to these lengthy waits, with applications for one or two-bedroom dwellings far outnumbering supply.[38]

Supply is not the sole issue facing the public housing system in the Northern Territory. There is a backlog of approximately $169 million for repair and maintenance work on public housing leading to ageing and poor quality properties.[39,40] In remote communities, which have a higher proportion of First Nations people, overcrowding is also a significant issue.[41] Overcrowded housing can contribute to detrimental physical, mental and developmental outcomes, as well as inhibiting economic participation.[42] This challenge is discussed further in Chapter 6.6 of the *2019 Australian Infrastructure Audit*, with targeted reform priorities found across Chapters 1.4 and 8.1 in the *2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan*.

Key facts:

Outright ownership accounts for

15%

of dwelling tenures in the Northern Territory, compared to the national rate of 31%.[43]

The Northern Territory Government's housing portfolio consists of

10,852

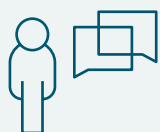**social housing dwellings and 395 affordable rental dwellings.**[44]

54%

of homes in remote First Nations communities are considered overcrowded.[45]

Impact:

- The Northern Territory has almost 12 times Australia's average homeless rate. 81% of all homelessness is caused by overcrowding.[46]

- It is estimated that 5,000 additional three-bedroom homes are required to meet demand in remote communities.[47]In order for implementation to be successful, First Nations communities should be involved in the planning and delivery of housing infrastructure in remote and regional communities.[48]

- Improving remote housing is likely to require a range of actions, including addressing maintenance deficiencies, renewing housing stock which has reached its end-of-life, delivering new housing stock and addressing land tenure issues.[49]

Consultation feedback:

Workshop participants identified housing availability and affordability to be critical infrastructure challenges facing the Northern Territory. Private and public housing shortages were key issues raised, with participants noting that these shortages acted as significant impediments to social wellbeing and access to employment. Housing availability in rural communities has put pressure on workforces such as health, education and hospitality. Stakeholders also noted that land tenure arrangements complicated the delivery of additional housing and is a critical factor in future development.

Interlinked with these challenges is consideration of population growth to support securing investment, regional migration, the broader impacts of fly in, fly out workforces workforces and sustainable local employment opportunities.

Participants in the Northern Territory First Nations stakeholder workshop identified housing supply and quality as pressing issues, particularly in remote communities facing overcrowding and insufficient investment in public housing maintenance and upgrades. The explicit involvement of First Nations stakeholders in policy and decisions was seen as crucial to ensuring the success of future public housing investments.

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