

Industry Engagement and Member Feedback - Approvals Fast Track Taskforce.

The Chamber of Commerce NT was invited to provide reform suggestions and recommendations to the Approvals Fast Track Taskforce. The Approvals Fast Track Taskforce was established to provide expert advice on streamlining approvals and removing unnecessary and burdensome regulations.

Industry engagement by the Chamber of Commerce NT (CCNT) with our members occurred over three weeks from 1 – 22 April 2025 and included a detailed industry survey, focus group, one-on-one meetings, and engagement with Industry Councils (Maritime, Manufacturing, International Business).

Member feedback has highlighted a number of key issues that are affecting Territory businesses, including significant delays in obtaining approvals, unclear regulatory requirements, and duplicative steps in the approval process. Of those surveyed;

- 95% of respondents said they had experienced significant delays in obtaining approvals.
- 87.5% of respondents felt that regulatory requirements were not clear or easy to understand.
- 69% believe there are duplicative and unnecessary steps in the approval process.
- 69% said they had experienced issues with regulation creep.
- 100% of respondents said they would support more risk-based approvals.
- 44% of respondents rated government agencies communication and responsiveness 'poor'.

The document below provides six suggested reform recommendations which are supported by detailed insights into the challenges being faced by Territory businesses.

REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: Implement a Risk-Based Approvals Framework Across Government

Low-risk business activities are being delayed by approval processes designed for higher-risk activities. There is currently no consistent definition or clear criteria for what constitutes a 'low-risk' project so decisions are being made based on outdated or generic frameworks that ignore project context.

Business owners have expressed frustration that efforts to grow responsibly are stifled by excessive requirements, even where planning, environmental and cultural assessments have already been addressed (e.g. Area Plans, AAPA certificates, baseline investigations). Approval bodies are not applying differentiated approaches for low-risk versus high-risk projects, which leads to wasted time and resources for both businesses and government.

A risk-based approach doesn't mean cutting corners, it means matching the level of scrutiny to the level of risk, allowing the NT Government to focus its resources where they matter most, while helping businesses operate and grow more efficiently.

Proposed Reform Solution:

- Establish a whole-of-government Risk-Based Approvals Framework that categorises projects and applications based on economic, environmental, social and cultural risk, not just administrative type or agency ownership.

- Develop clear guidelines and criteria for what defines a low, medium or high-risk project—developed in consultation with industry stakeholders.
- Enable a ‘fast-track’ pathway for low-risk projects (e.g. small business grants, non-material licence renewals, pre-zoned developments with completed consultations).
- Agencies to develop and publish risk categories and decision-making logic to improve consistency and transparency.
- Regularly review and update the risk model using project outcomes and stakeholder feedback.

Recommendation #2: Address the Multiple Layers of ‘Tape’ that Impede Business in the NT

There are many levels of ‘tape’—not just red tape—that need to be addressed as part of this regulatory reform process. These layers create compounding burdens that frustrate investment, delay projects, and deter business growth.

- **Red Tape** - excessive or unnecessary bureaucratic procedures, regulations, and processes that cause delays or hinder progress.
- **Beige Tape** – Inefficiencies caused by poor government service delivery.
- **Green Tape** – Environmental and cultural approvals that are overly complex or duplicative, or not fit for purpose.
- **Black Tape** – complexity of cultural approvals and understanding administrative processes when working with Indigenous organisations.

Businesses face overlapping requirements across departments, such as needing to submit the same plans to multiple agencies or completing near-identical processes for contractor registration and tendering. There is a lack of confidence to delegate decision making which also means there is little accountability. Better integrated strategic planning, and approved land use plans over areas that have been derisked or approved will assist with derisking projects and expediting approvals. The best way to derisk and enable confident decision making through all levels of Government is to derisk through planning.

Proposed reform solution:

- As part of the Approvals Taskforce review, look to remove duplicated steps and adopt a ‘Tell Us Once’ model using a centralised data-sharing systems between agencies to streamline submission and assessment processes.
- Green tape has become so overreaching with environment extending to include flora, fauna, social, cultural and other environmental factors. A review of the Act should be considered.
- Identify areas of conflicting advice to ensure consistency and accuracy of information between departments/agencies.
- Recommendations around suggested Beige tape improvements are captured as part of Recommendation #4.
- Working through Black tape issues (examples provided: AAPA, ILUA, Native Title Act, S19) is complex, time consuming and there are no clear pathways or processes to enforce accountability or enter negotiation. Opportunities to look at regions that are run directly by native title holders (not through Land Councils) and where the native title holders have been

invested in building survey/ heritage capacity and hence able to process quickly and effectively, and where development has been successful in similar circumstances (e.g the Pilbara).

Recommendation #3: Establish a Centralised Digital Approvals Portal with Parallel Processing Capability

Approval processes are siloed and sequential, leading to long delays (e.g. 2–3 months for fingerprint checks or 28-day response times from for basic site or infrastructure access). Different agencies have conflicting advice and non-aligned timeframes. There is extensive duplication with businesses often having to submit the same information multiple times.

Proposed Reform Solution:

- Develop a centralised NT Government Approvals Portal that allows businesses to submit one application and track all approvals (land use, environment, WHS, infrastructure, etc.) in one place.
- Enable parallel processing of permits to reduce cumulative delays. Consider the inclusion of a ‘smart form’ submission tool that auto-populates data across related applications and flags missing requirements early.
- Enable a facility for businesses to be able to log in to view real-time updates, submit missing information, and communicate through a central dashboard that captures responses and communication.
- For companies renewing/extending existing licences or accreditations without amendments, processes could be simplified.

Recommendation #4: Introduce Statutory Timeframes, Performance Reporting and/or Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for Regulatory Bodies and Departments, that are publicly reported.

Industry wants to see increased accountability and performance outcomes and better whole-of-government alignment to improve timeframes, communication and payments to businesses. Priority areas for improvement noted were;

- Assessment and approval timeframes
- Government responsiveness and communication
- Procurement and tendering
- Invoicing and payments

Businesses are facing uncertainty due to indefinite wait times around approvals, decision making (tenders and quotes) and lack of recourse for delays and non-payments (decision outcomes, delayed payments). Currently, there is a lack of clear timeframes or SLAs for many approvals (e.g. AAPA, Land Councils, NT WorkSafe, Environment as well as tenders and procurement). Approvals and decisions are seemingly delayed by a lack of specialist/industry knowledge in departments, bottle necks around decision making and approvals, NTG staffing shortages and poor responsiveness overall from agencies and departments.

A number of businesses noted recurring issues with receiving payments from some government departments. Some payments have been over six months late which has a considerable negative effect on cash flow, business planning and growth, as well as payment of suppliers and subcontractors.

Proposed Reform Solution:

- Implement legislated or policy-based timeframes for key approval types (e.g. 24 hour response time to emails and phone calls, 21 days for DA responses, 10 days for WHS licensing, 14 days for environmental clearance etc) and require agencies to publish their performance quarterly.
- Introduce internal staff and departmental performance reporting. Achievements and improvements to be reported in annual departmental reports and tied to executive KPIs.
- Establish an escalation and review mechanism when SLAs are not met, so that businesses are able to escalate issues and delays. Apply penalties for failure to meet deadlines (impact on remuneration or funding) or scope of responsibility. E.g. invest in and expand the scope of work and responsibility of efficient and effective departments, cut back on poorly performing ones.
- Consider an annual ‘Regulatory Clean-Out’, a government-wide policy requiring each agency to annually identify at least 1–2 outdated, redundant, or overlapping regulatory processes that could be simplified, merged, or repealed.
- Standardise guidance documents and approval workflows to provide better internal delegation so that Government staff are confident to be able to make informed decisions.
- Train front-line staff in ‘regulatory literacy’ to ensure consistent advice across agencies.
- The processing system under the former DCIS was effective and efficient and should be reconsidered.

Additionally, there needs to be increased quality control around regulatory and general information and processes being published by departments and regulatory bodies. Departments should be regularly checking websites and forms to ensure that these have clear and easy to understand instructions, that all information is correct and current, outdated information should be removed and broken links should be corrected or removed. Comprehensive and searchable online manuals for each approval type, including visual flowcharts and contact points should be available to better support complex processes and/or first time applicants.

Recommendation #5: Establish an Office of the Northern Territory Procurement Coordinator

The Northern Territory Government already has a comprehensive procurement framework, including legislation, regulations, policy, and rules, all aimed at achieving better procurement outcomes and supporting local participation. The Buy Local Plan and the Buy Local Industry Advocate play key roles in promoting local business engagement and monitoring compliance. Concerns amongst local businesses is that the current Buy Local Industry Advocate role in government lacks the authority or legislated powers to enact fair and reasonable outcomes.

Many local SMEs still face challenges navigating complex procurement requirements, understanding tender processes, and building the capability needed to compete effectively. Furthermore, the

challenges felt by Territory businesses in dealing with bureaucracy in existing contracts can be debilitating and harmful to local business.

The Office of the Northern Territory Procurement Coordinator would ensure compliance of existing contracts with government entities, to ensure that the reasonable management of working agreements are maintained adhering to relevant procurement rules and policies, between business and government. It would also act as a central point of contact for local businesses and support for local SMEs seeking to supply goods and services to the NT Government.

Proposed reform solutions

- Upgrade the Buy Local Industry Advocate to a more substantial Office of NT Procurement Ombudsman that investigates and resolves complaints related to procurement processes, ensuring a fair relationship within existing contracts and efficient government spending.
- Establishing an Office of the Northern Territory Procurement Coordinator would provide dedicated support to local SMEs engaging with government procurement processes. This office would help ensure that local enterprises have a full, fair, and reasonable opportunity to compete for government contracts, thereby maximising the economic and social benefits of government spending within the Territory.

Similar models in other jurisdictions: Commonwealth Ombudsman, Australian Government Procurement Coordinator, Victorian Ombudsman, Queensland Procurement Investigation Unit, Western Australia Ombudsman.

Recommendation #6: Reform Options to Address Regulation Creep

Regulation creep occurs when the approval process becomes more complex over time due to incremental changes, increasing the overall regulatory burden. This includes additional paperwork, longer processing times, involvement of multiple departments, higher compliance costs, and changing or unclear requirements. Regulation creep is leading to increased complexity over time (e.g. new greenhouse gas rules with no guidance). Businesses must navigate inconsistent rules across regions and overlapping departmental requirements.

Proposed Reform Solution:

- Provide whole-of-government coordination for cross-agency processes (e.g. sacred site access, environmental impact assessments, planning approvals). Share and make available similar information between departments and statutory authorities to eliminate duplications.
- Consult with industry/users when changes are identified so that practical, simple processes can be developed for implementation by users.
- Conduct rolling reviews of overlapping or outdated regulations.
- Provide better liaison between industry and departments to ensure reforms are user-focused and practical.