

Strategic Regional Plan



Snapshot

This document outlines the 2030 Strategic Regional Plan for Australia's Indian Ocean Territories Regional Development Organisation (IOT RDO). The Indian Ocean Territories (IOT) comprise Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

The plan has been developed by the IOT RDO through research, stakeholder engagement and economic analysis and addresses the requirements under the Regional Development Australia (RDA) charter.

The plan identifies strategic priorities for the region and informs the annual workplan of the IOT RDO. It is designed to help plan the organisation's strategies and actions and to enable regular business planning and review in years to come.

The Strategic Regional Plan provides background on the IOT region and the processes and previous research that led to the development of the plan, including background on the IOT RDO supporting structures already in place.

The plan then outlines the recent research and engagement undertaken to prepare the strategy, maps a framework to deliver the outcomes, and presents a plan for the ongoing implementation of these outcomes in the years ahead.

Purpose

The Strategic Regional Plan aims to leverage the region's natural assets, and community strengths, richness and vibrance, to foster a more diverse economy, and a stronger, more resilient, and capable region.

This can be achieved through strategic coordination and collaboration to overcome barriers to investment and economic activity.

IOT RDO vision statement

In all four languages used across the region, the IOT RDO's vision is:

- Working together to create a thriving future for our island communities (English)
- Pernyataan wawasan Sama-sama berusaha mewujudkan masa depan yang berkembang maju untuk komuniti pulau kita (Malay)
- 愿景声明 携手合作为我们的岛屿社区创造繁荣的 未来 (simplified Chinese)
- Pernyataan visi Bekerjasama untuk membina masa depan yang berkembang untuk masyarakat pulu kita (Coccos Malav)

Key strategic priorities for the region

- Support sustainable growth and development, and improve liveability for our communities
- Achieve reliable, competitive, and cost-effective supply chains (freight and flights)
- Support environmental and sustainability initiatives
- Develop regional capability
- Maximise sustainable tourism growth potential for long-term business viability



Contents

1.	About the IOT		
	1.1	Christmas Island	3
	1.2	Cocos (Keeling) Islands	4
	1.3	Regional Development Australia	5
	1.4	Drivers of the regional economy	5
	1.5	Comparative advantages	6
2.	Ser	rvice delivery, security, and governance	7
	2.1	Regional service delivery	7
	2.2	Australian Government responsibilities	7
	2.3	Security and defence opportunities	7
	2.4	Governance and coordination	7
3.	De	veloping a Strategic Plan	9
	3.1	Australian Government's economic plan	9
	3.2	The regional economy	9
	3.3	Infrastructure constraints	9
	3.4	Previous research	10
	3.5	Background to the Strategic Regional Plan	11
	3.6	Core principles	11
	3.7	The Plan development process	11

4.	Strategic vision and development priorities 1		
	4.1 Vision statement	1	
	4.2 Defining regional priorities	1	
5.	Strategic regional priorities		
6.	Implementation 1		
	Credits	2	
	Appendix A – Engagement process		

1. About the IOT

Australia's remote Indian Ocean Territories boast unique natural assets in their flora and fauna and marine life, as well as harmonious multicultural communities. The region is environmentally important: a large part of Christmas Island is a national park, and marine parks have been declared throughout the IOT.

Both territories are quite distinct. They are close neighbours geographically and share similar challenges and opportunities, such as remoteness, climate, and proximity to Asia. But they are also different, in terms of their demographics, aspirations, and potential opportunities for development.

The Australian Government manages both islands as external territories and is responsible to ensure good governance and service delivery throughout the IOT.

The Strategic Regional Plan aims to leverage the region's natural assets and community strengths to foster a more diverse economy, and a stronger, more resilient, and capable region. These aims can be achieved through strategic coordination and collaboration to overcome barriers to investment and economic activity.



Indian Ocean Territories - regional map

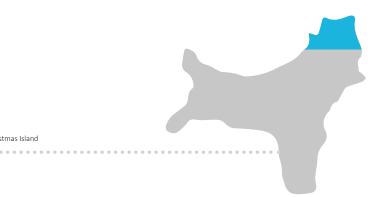
1 https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/POA6798

1.1 Christmas Island

Christmas Island is 2,605 km from Perth and 490 km south of Jakarta. The island perches at the tip of a 5,000-metre submarine volcano, its highest point 361 metres above sea level. Unique aspects of the island include:

- a total land area of more than 135 km2, with almost two thirds being national park
- 1,692 residents (2021 census1)
- a median age of 38 years, consistent with the mainland
- an increase in people aged over 65 in the last 5 years from 8% of the population to almost 13%
- 60% of households report a non-English language is spoken at home
- extraordinary access to the deep ocean and its marine creatures, as well as world-class Ramsar (wetlands) sites of significance
- the annual red crab migration between October and January, an internationally renowned natural event.





2 https://www.abs.gov.au/census/ find-census-data/quickstats/2021/ POA6798

1.2 Cocos (Keeling) Islands

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands are 2,935 km from Perth and 985 km west of Christmas Island. They comprise 27 low-lying coral islands that form two atolls. Unique aspects of the island group include:

- a total land area of 15.6 km2
- 593 residents (2021 census²) living on two islands: Home Island and West Island
- 80% of residents are Cocos Malay and live on Home Island
- Cocos Malay, a unique dialect of Malay, is the most common language spoken on Home Island
- the vast majority of members of the remaining population identify as being of European descent
- an overall median age of 40 years, slightly higher than the mainland
- an increase in people aged over 65 in the last 5 years from just under 10% of the population to almost 17%
- Cocos (Keeling) Islands is a tropical environment that encircles turquoise lagoon waters and is only 3 metres above mean sea level⁵.





1.3 Regional Development Australia

The IOT RDO is part of the RDA network and is acutely conscious of the region's unique challenges and opportunities. The objective of the IOT RDO is to build the future of the region through facilitating and promoting sustainable economic development in this special part of Australia.

RDA supports economic development in regional Australia via its network and through local representation and leadership. It works with all levels of government, business, and community to see regions develop macro level Strategic Regional Plans. Such plans identify strategic priorities and can help regions to identify, focus, prepare, and implement strategies for the future.

The IOT RDO is a member of the Northern RDA Alliance which comprises RDA regions that are located in and support the Australian Government's Northern Australia development agenda. The IOT region has not always been considered in this policy agenda resulting in some programs not being available to the IOT. It is critical that the IOT region is considered part of the Northern Australia agenda, and recent changes to the geographic coverage of the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (NAIF) legislation are welcomed.

1.4 Drivers of the regional economy

The economic drivers of the IOT region are distinctive and varied, yet certain characteristics are shared between the two islands.

The region enjoys a tropical climate, is significantly closer to Asia than the Australian mainland, and has multi-cultural communities with strong links to the north. The region also enjoys relatively low levels of crime, and stakeholders reported feeling safe living in the region.

Nevertheless, there are differences.

Christmas Island's largest private sector employer has for many years been PRL Group, which employs over 50% of the total workforce in its associated businesses. In turn, PRL Group contributes more than 47% of the island's Gross Regional Product (GRP)³. While PRL Group has a lease to continue mining until 2034, and prior to which mining activities will likely cease, it nonetheless wants to remain on the island and turn its business model from mining to other activities, including tourism.

Conversely, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands economy is heavily reliant on Commonwealth funded projects, activities, and services, with smaller contributions from other industries, including tourism.

It should be noted that the IOT overall has a modest tourism industry, but one with potential for future growth⁴. Any growth must however be balanced with broader impacts on regional accessibility, environment, infrastructure, and residents.

Transport to and from the region can be unreliable and uncertain, triggering supply chain impacts that detrimentally affect business and hamper economic growth.

The Australian Government underwrites regular public transport (RPT)

3 https://prlgroup.com.au/ourbusiness/resources-energy/cirpchristmas-island-phosphates/

4 IOT Destination Management and Marketing Plan, The Ayre Group, 2021 flights to the IOT due to the relatively small market, yet significant operational challenges remain, both for goods and people coming into and through the region. Achieving reliable, competitive, and cost-effective supply chains was identified as the key strategic issue for the region.

1.5 Comparative advantages

The environment and natural assets are the most significant comparative advantages for the IOT. Natural features range from world class Ramsar wetlands and national parks to extreme ocean depths near the shoreline, coral reefs, and extensive marine life.

All of these are relatively untouched by industry or development. People are drawn to the region's environmental beauty, its untouched and uncrowded areas, world class diving, and unique events such as the annual red crab migration on Christmas Island.

The region's natural assets must be maintained and improved where possible to preserve the environment and retain this advantage, and mechanisms such as park proclamation can support this.

The natural assets might also be leveraged for economic activity, but this would need to be balanced with the maintenance of environmental values. Such an approach is endorsed in the Community Values mapping project conducted in March 2022 as part of the Christmas Island Strategic Assessment.

In this study, the community voiced its desire for sustainable development

that leveraged natural assets while also protecting the environment and supporting conservation practices⁵.

Other advantages of the region include its proximity to Asia and the opportunities that this market represents. As the standard of living increases in the region, there will be higher demand for goods and services.

The richness and vibrance of the communities, and their cultural links to the region also present opportunities, given familial linkages can drive economic activity through visiting friends and relatives and through experiences that target particular groups, such as Muslims⁶.

5 Community values on Christmas Island- Report on What We Heard, Publication DITRDCA

6 IOT Destination Management and Marketing Plan, The Ayre Group, 2021





2. Service delivery, security and governance

2.1 Regional service delivery

The Australian Government facilitates services for the IOT region that would traditionally be provided through state governments. This is owing to the unique governance arrangements of the IOT being external territories administered by the Australian Government, and the narrow market that operates there.

State type services are delivered through several mechanisms, including Service Delivery Arrangements (SDAs) with the Western Australian (WA) Government, directly by the private sector under contract, and by responsible Commonwealth departments and agencies. As of June 2022, the Australian Government has 39 separate arrangements with the WA Government to deliver 51 services.

Goods and services tax (GST) does not apply in the IOT region, and goods and services provided to the region are treated as GST-free exports.

2.2 Australian Government responsibilities

The 2022/23 Portfolio Budget Statements⁷ describe the allocation of resources to achieve government outcomes. The performance measure under which the Australian Government operates is that:

"Communities in the external territories and Jervis Bay Territory have comparable services and essential infrastructure to mainland Australia."

This performance measure acknowledges that the Australian Government has a responsibility to ensure that residents of the IOT have comparable levels of service delivery and infrastructure that other Australian residents enjoy elsewhere in the country.

2.3 Security and defence opportunities

The Plan acknowledges the important role of the region in the geopolitics, security, and defence of the broader region and Australia. Facilities such as the North West Point Immigration Detention Facility on Christmas Island support jobs and economic activity on the island.

The IOT region also serves as a supply centre for Australian assets that traverse the region. While defence, national security and biosecurity activities in the IOT offer economic opportunities, this plan does not focus on these activities or policies.

There are, however, security and defence related projects that significantly impact the economy and should be considered. In these instances, the IOT RDO should focus on local benefits including potential legacy projects based on best practice environmental, social and governance practices.

The current project to upgrade the Cocos (Keeling) Islands airstrip is one example, where the IOT RDO can, in concert with the community, the Department of Defence and construction contractors, negotiate legacy projects to benefit the community long after the project is completed.

2.4 Governance and coordination

Governance of the islands is unique, in that they are governed and managed by the Australian Government with federal electoral representation that is part of the Northern Territory. The IOT does not have state government representation through WA but is instead represented by local governments who operate under WA local government legislation and frameworks.

7 https://www.infrastructure gov.au/sites/default/files/ documents/2022-23_infra_ pbs 00_itrdc.pdf The WA Government also has a role in some IOT regulatory requirements, such as waste management and liquor licensing. This requires compliance and engagement with WA departments regarding both policy and regulation.

These challenges are common to many regional communities across Australia, and the challenges of remote service delivery do have an impact on access to quality services. External factors often disrupt supply and affect the standard of services, resulting in minimal choice, inconsistent service and near market failure.

These issues require constant attention to achieve or maintain appropriate standards of service. In a narrow market with scarce resources, effective coordination, communication, and genuine partnerships between funding bodies and the community are critical to achieving the best possible productivity and outcomes.

Stakeholder quo

Government needs to be a trusted partner who engages with us, actively supports local priorities, and removes barriers to development.

3. Developing a Strategic Regional Plan

The IOT RDO Strategic Regional Plan (the Plan) is focussed on the entire IOT region, however it also aims to make the Plan relevant for individual communities, businesses, governments, and potential investors.

It has been developed by the IOT RDO in line with RDA requirements, and informed by the new Australian Government's economic priorities.

3.1 Australian Government's economic plan

The Australian Government's economic plan is focussed on a stronger, broader, more inclusive, and more sustainable economy, one that is powered by cleaner and cheaper energy, a better trained workforce with higher participation and key investments in the care economy, digital economy, and a future that is made in Australia⁸. It's five-point economic plan is calibrated to:

- reduce the cost of living
- drive productivity growth
- expand the capacity of the economy to alleviate supply side pressures
- grow wages
- invest public money in a way that delivers genuine economic value for Australians.

The Australian Government's policies for regional Australia include to reinvigorate regional development architecture, improve connectivity, make fisheries sustainable, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support

marine parks. Such policies to strengthen the regions create opportunities for the IOT region.

8 https://alp.org.au/policies/ labors-economic-plan-and-budgetstrategy

3.2 The regional economy

The IOT economy is currently reliant on two main industries: government and mining. Other industries such as tourism, logistics and the environment are small to medium, or still in development. Funding provided by the Australian Government is substantial and allows residents to access municipal and essential services, including health, education, and justice services.

This funding contributes to the health and wellbeing of the community and the lifestyle found throughout the IOT. The reported health status of the community in the 2021 census indicates better health outcomes for the IOT region than for the rest of Australia.

Opportunities exist to leverage the region's natural assets such as marine parks which were declared for waters surrounding Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2022. Together with existing national parks, they provide a natural attraction for tourists and positive social outcomes for residents. Parks in the region have international conservation significance and are an important economic driver.

The region's cultural diversity and multi-cultural communities are also an asset to be leveraged, evidenced recently through the Indian Ocean FEst where marine life and cultural diversity were emphasised as a tourism selling point.

3.3 Infrastructure constraints

It should be noted that there are significant infrastructure constraints throughout the IOT, whether on port infrastructure, accommodation (permanent and workers), tourist accommodation, storage of fuel, or other essential services. Given such constraints, the Plan approaches development incrementally, so that associated infrastructure can be improved at the same time as economic development opportunities are being realised. To do otherwise could result in failures of infrastructure and services, and the consequent alienation of residents who will feel the brunt of the changes.

It is also noted that plans for the repair, maintenance and replacement of critical assets in the region are not transparent and there are concerns that this will result in ongoing failures, such as the Smith Point mooring. Additional information about these critical assets, and a plan to manage them, may help to allay the concerns of residents, businesses, and stakeholders.

Some infrastructure in the region is, however, underutilised, such as the former casino resort on Christmas Island. A mechanism should be explored to ensure such infrastructure remains productive for the benefit of the region.

There are also constraints around access to land for housing and sustainable development opportunities on both Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. The Christmas Island Strategic Assessment, which is attempting to remove barriers for land release and development, is an

excellent initiative which should be fast tracked for completion. Further consideration of land release of both crown land on Christmas Island and land held in trust on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands should also be considered. These and other initiatives are required to support improved coordination and de-risking of identified potential capital and infrastructure projects to reduce first mover disadvantage and achieve a greater success rate for government investment and privately funded projects.

3.4 Previous research

Dozens of detailed reports, plans and strategies about the IOT have been completed over the past decade. The reports detail the challenges, opportunities and community aspirations for the region, and for their local areas, individual industries, organisations, and businesses.

The research provides a baseline from which to identify, understand and contextualise the issues and opportunities affecting the region, whether these be around specific industries, service delivery, infrastructure constraints or local and regional coordination. This research underpins mnay of the recommendations in this Plan.

3.5 Background to the Strategic Regional Plan 2030

In 2018, the IOT RDO developed detailed strategic plans for Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, setting specific priorities until 2030. However, the IOT RDO identified there was not an overarching high level strategic document for the region and has developed a Strategic Regional Plan to distil all the key information into one succinct, high level plan.

The result is the IOT RDO Strategic Regional Plan 2030, which is focussed on a period of structural adjustment as the IOT economy transitions from a traditional, narrowly based economy heavily reliant on government investment and mining, to a more dynamic and diverse economy, one that acknowledges its social and environmental base and looks beyond 2030. Potential key industries identified for development include:

- the visitor economy (tourists and visiting friends and relatives)
- environmental economy (identifying positive economic impacts from environmental policies)
- renewable energy
- · research economy.

3.6 Core principles

The Plan is guided by a set of core principles, identified by the IOT RDO as part of developing the Plan, that will also guide how the IOT RDO

implements the Plan. The principles that guide the Plan are to:

- strive to improve governance, service delivery and funding arrangements through collaboration, genuine partnership, and trust with the Australian Government
- strive to maintain and leverage the region's natural and environmental assets and to share these with others while balancing local community needs to ensure equity
- be strategic and act locally so that everyone enjoys the benefits
- acknowledge the requirement to transition the economy from a narrowly based and underdeveloped market, to a diversified and more robust market driven economy
- build trust with the community, business, government and key international partners
- continue to focus on opportunities and engage in challenges through a problem solving approach adopting innovation and new technologies to drive efficiency
- build transparent communication, engagement, reporting and monitoring.

3.7 The Plan development process

Several approaches were taken when developing the Plan. First, a detailed thematic analysis was conducted of historic and current plans, strategies, and research. Second, three types of engagement were undertaken, being an online survey and individual consultations with key regional stakeholders

including government agencies, local business, not-for-profit associations and community organisations, and workshops with the IOT RDO.

A thematic and economic analysis was conducted on information and data sourced through the engagement and research process. Some key findings include:

Top regional economic enablers

- Fast and reliable telecommunications and data
- Structural and policy reform (in particular, addressing regional barriers to development)
- Regular and reliable air and sea freight services (in particular, supply chain improvements)

Top recurring themes in existing source documents

- Protecting local and regional cultural and social strengths
- Improved connectivity / digital infrastructure
- Improved governance

Top themes emerging from stakeholder engagement

- Environmental sustainability
- Supply chain issues
- Improving tourism
- Regional capability development

- Flight access and affordability
- Regional opportunities looking north
- Regional coordination, advocacy, and representation
- · Access to housing and accommodation for residents, staff, and contractors

Top systemic challenges to development and investment

- Lack of local power and influence in government decisions that impact the region
- Lack of understanding of government priorities for the region
- Lack of single voice across the region
- Decision makers providing more information to stakeholders and the community about services and contingency plans when arrangements are not working

IOT RDO quote

The Strategic Regional Plan will help the IOT RDO to achieve success by providing a framework for sustainable development of the region, and a basis for the RDO's annual business plans over the life of the Plan.



4. Strategic vision and development priorities

The IOT RDO has identified a vision for the region to articulate at the highest levels what it wants to achieve in the long term and to set priorities for how it plans to get there.

4.1 Vision statement

In all four languages used across the region, the IOT RDO's vision for the region is:

Working together
to create a thriving
future for our island
communities

English

Sama-sama berusaha mewujudkan masa depan yang berkembang maju untuk komuniti pulau kita

Bekerjasama
untuk membina
masa depan yang
berkembang untuk
masyarakat pulu kita

Cocos Malay

携手合作为我们的岛屿社区创造繁荣的未

Chinese

4.2 Defining regional priorities

In setting strategic regional priorities for development over the next eight years, the IOT RDO has considered the need for the region to undergo an economic transition and structural adjustment over this time.

A plan to transition the IOT regional economy to be more resilient, robust and market driven will help to lessen the impacts of industry disruption, such as the ultimate closure of mining on Christmas Island.

Key strategic priorities identified through research, engagement, and economic analysis are:

- Support sustainable growth and development, and improve liveability for our communities
- Achieve reliable, competitive, and cost-effective supply chains (freight and flights)
- Support environmental and sustainability initiatives
- Develop regional capability
- Maximise sustainable tourism growth potential for long-term business viability

Focus areas are identified under these priorities, and each year specific actions will be identified in the IOT RDO Annual Business Plan. Regular review of the plan will ensure it remains up to date and relevant to the region, its economy, and the geopolitical situation.

IOT RDO quote

The region needs improved logistics and infrastructure, and a deeper understanding of which industries are important and how to sustain them.

5. Strategic regional priorities

2030 Strategic priority

Support sustainable growth and development, and improve liveability for our communities

Focus area

- Develop and implement an IOT regional engagement framework that brings together all levels of government, the private sector, and other key regional stakeholders to facilitate discussion and collaboration, and to agree on actions and timeframes for the achievement of outcomes
- Develop and implement a feedback and communications framework for the various levels of stakeholders in the region to enable two-way communication regarding macro-level issues
- Achieve improvements in local and regional priorities that impact sustainable growth and development and liveability that can only be influenced at the macro level
- Achieve reliable, competitive, and costeffective supply chains (freight and flights)
- Conduct a detailed, independent critical review and analysis of the supply chain management model and system, and implement recommendations for improvement, with monitoring and evaluation to inform ongoing improvements

Regional benefit

- Government, the private sector and other key regional stakeholders are all engaged at different levels to implement solutions and remove barriers to sustainable economic development and liveability improvements in the region
- Stakeholder groups in the region have two-way channels for communication, and all communication and engagement occur in ways that will suit and benefit each stakeholder group
- Improvements across identified regional priority areas
- Improved reliability and efficiency of supply chains to better support the movement of people, goods and services into and across the IOT, resulting in business and development opportunities, and improvements in liveability for our communities

2030 Strategic priority

Support environmental and sustainability initiatives

Focus area

- Investigate and implement mitigations and solutions to the impacts of projected sea level rise and climate change impacts at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands
- Implement mitigations to manage the risks of storm water, flooding, landslide and rockfall on Christmas Island
- Develop and implement waste management solutions that enable the region to become a leader in waste management for remote islands
- Unlock the potential of renewable energy technology to power the region
- Protect marine life and surrounding marine waters and ecosystems
- Preserve and maintain terrestrial ecosystems

Regional benefit

- The local community and stakeholders are supported during the Coastal Hazard Risk Management and Adaptation Planning (CHRMAP) process, and mitigations and solutions are implemented
- Residences and infrastructure on Christmas Island are protected and preserved, and key areas remain safe destinations to live, work and visit
- · New solutions and uses for waste are identified and implemented, and new investment in waste management and specifically in new technologies suitable for remote regions is
- The barriers to the progression of renewable energy projects are removed, with the potential of providing significant savings to government and improving energy security
- Marine life and surrounding marine waters and ecosystems are prioritised and supported, including support for marine research opportunities and marine park initiatives and programs
- Terrestrial ecosystems are prioritised and supported, including support for research opportunities and national park initiatives and programs

2030 Strategic priority	Focus area	Regional benefit
Develop regional capability	Improve communications and digital connectivity	Improved telecommunications and digital connectivity across the region, including equitable access to fast and reliable internet and mobile telecommunications
	Support the development of local business capability and capacity	Local businesses have the capability and capacity to realise their potential, and to obtain maximum benefits from emerging opportunities
	Support local and regional employment, and workforce development	Local and regional employment and workforce development initiatives are supported, and prepare the workforce for the jobs of the future
	Increase the benefits of major projects to our local communities	Major government and privately funded projects are leveraged to provide direct benefit to our local communities, including but not limited to achievement of outcomes across employment, training, contracts, goods and services and legacy infrastructure
Maximise sustainable tourism growth potential for	Build the visitor economy, while respecting social, cultural and environmental needs of the community and other key regional stakeholders	Initiatives that improve experiences, lengthen the tourism season, and target higher yield tourists to build the visitor economy in a sustainable way are implemented
long-term business viability	Improve tourism assets, infrastructure, and services	 A coordinated approach to upgrading existing or developing new tourism assets, infrastructure and services is undertaken to maximise benefits to the wider community and visitors

6. Implementation

Each year the IOT RDO Committee will develop a 12 month Annual Business Plan. The plan will map activities for the coming year, with each activity matched to priorities and focus areas outlined in the IOT RDO Strategic Regional Plan.

The IOT RDO Committee will support, guide, and monitor the performance of the organisation against the annual business plans and the IOT RDO Strategic Regional Plan.

IOT RDO quote

The Strategic Regional Plan will support planning and improved communication between stakeholders, and provide direction and focus for the future. Collaboration and unity are core to achieving common goals.

Credits

This Strategic Regional Plan was produced by the Indian Ocean Territories
Regional Development Organisation, which operates under the Regional
Development Australia framework. Support, guidance and final approval for
the document was provided in August 2022 by the Indian Ocean Territories
Regional Development Organisation Committee.

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- Image page 3 Kirsty Faulkner
- Image page 4 Kirsty Faulkner
- Image page 6 Max Veenhuyzen
- Image page 13 Karen Wilshaw



Appendix A - Engagement process

The following embedded link will take you to a web-based appendix dashboard that details the engagement process undertaken and key findings that informed the IOT RDO during the development of the Strategic Regional Plan.

https://app.smartsheet.com/b/ publish?EQBCT=af37b7514a224a709d55ed30cc6b7b8c