

OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT WITH PACIFIC ISLAND NATIONS & TRADELINKED CAIRNS INCORPORATED RESOURCE AND PERFORMANCE AGREEMENT

EDA | 58/1/2 | #7853684

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council:

1. Notes the priority opportunities to enhance engagement with Pacific Island nations and Council's role in progressing those opportunities as outlined in this report;
2. Approves the amendment and extension of Council's Resource and Performance Agreement with Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated for the period 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028, with annual funding of up to \$48,000 ex GST; and
3. Delegates authority to the Chief Executive Officer in accordance with the *Local Government Act 2009* to finalise any and all matters associated with the Resource and Performance Agreement.

INTERESTED PARTIES:

- Lae City Authority
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Regional Development Australia Tropical North
- Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated

(Note: The identification of interested parties is provided on a best endeavours basis by Council Officers and may not be exhaustive.)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The first part of this report outlines a series of priority opportunities identified to enhance engagement with neighbouring Pacific Island nations. Each opportunity included in this section aligns with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) *Pacific Engagement Opportunities Analysis Report* noted by Council on 15 October 2025.

The second part of the report also relates to ASPI's recommendations and seeks approval from Council to amend and extend Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated's (Tradelinked) Resource and Performance Agreement with Council for a further two years, from 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028, at an increased funding level of up to \$48,000 ex GST per annum (currently \$20,000 ex GST per annum) to support a broader scope of Pacific-oriented initiatives.

BACKGROUND:

A key strategy in Council's Corporate Plan 2025–2030 is to leverage Cairns' proximity to, and long-standing connections with, Asia–Pacific neighbours. Cairns has an established relationship with the Pacific, including a sister city partnership with Lae, Papua New Guinea.

In 2025, Council commissioned the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) to identify opportunities to strengthen engagement with Pacific Island nations and build on existing partnerships. This resulted in the *Pacific Engagement Opportunities Analysis for Cairns Regional Council* (ASPI report). The recommendations in the ASPI report were noted by Council on 15 October 2025 and an overview of the findings of the ASPI report are published on Council's website [here](#).

The ASPI report also identifies securing sustainable funding for Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated, trading at Tradelinked Cairns–PNG–Pacific (Tradelinked) as a high priority.

Council currently supports Tradelinked through a Resource and Performance (R&P) Agreement established in 2023, providing \$20,000 (ex GST) per annum to deliver PNG/Pacific-focused initiatives. The Agreement is in place until 30 June 2026, with a two-year extension option to 30 June 2028 exercisable at Council's discretion.

Tradelinked's current Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are as follows:

- Support a minimum of one inbound delegation from a targeted Pacific nation per annum.
- Support a minimum of one outbound delegation to a targeted Pacific nation per annum.
- Promote opportunities for further air and sea connectivity with targeted Pacific nations, including air services with Lae.
- Develop materials to assist Cairns-based businesses in 'doing business' in targeted Pacific nations.
- Amount of additional funds leveraged as a result of Council's funding agreement.
- Number and nature of actions undertaken or assisted in order to support the delivery of Cairns Regional Council's Corporate Plan and Economic Development Strategy.

Council Officers have considered the findings contained in the ASPI report and have continued to engage with relevant stakeholders regarding opportunities aligned with the report's findings. This Council Report outlines a series of priority opportunities that Officers will seek to progress in this regard as well as Council's role in progressing them noting that in a number of instances, the opportunities are led by others. One of these opportunities is considering additional funding to support the increased capacity and capability of Tradelinked to facilitate business to business trade and engagement between Cairns and Pacific nations.

It should be noted that the Federal Government is primarily responsible for nation-to-nation engagement between Australia and Pacific Island countries with this engagement facilitated through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The role of local governments (including Cairns) is a supplemental one that needs to be aligned with

adopted strategies and policies at the Federal level. Accordingly, the opportunities outlined in this report have been developed with this in mind and following consultation with representatives of DFAT’s Office of the Pacific to ensure they align with, and are complementary to, strategies and initiatives being implemented at the Federal level. Ongoing engagement with DFAT representatives will continue to take place as these opportunities are progressed to ensure this alignment is maintained.

COMMENT:

Part 1 – Priority Pacific Opportunities

The identified opportunities summarised in Table 1 aim to strengthen Cairns’ engagement across four key areas: capacity building exchange, Council partnerships and engagement, priority sector focus, and business-to-business connections.

These initiatives build on Cairns’ established relationships within the region and respond directly to priorities identified in the ASPI report. They emphasise a coordinated and staged approach and collectively the opportunities support increased regional connectivity, knowledge exchange, and economic engagement, while reinforcing Cairns’ role as a strategic northern gateway to the Pacific.

Table 1 – Summary of Priority Pacific Opportunities

#	Opportunity	Country Focus	Council’s Role
Capacity building exchange			
1	Investigate and (if appropriate) establish capacity building exchanges between Lae City Authority (LCA) and Council in areas such as disaster preparedness and resilience, tourism promotion, botanic gardens, planning and development, municipal services including waste, water, and infrastructure.	PNG	Partner, Facilitator
Council partnerships and engagement			
2	Continuation of Sister city activities and engagement with Lae (PNG).	PNG	Partner, Provider
3	Support DFAT in the potential expanded deployment of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme in the Cairns region, particularly in tourism, hospitality and aged care by facilitating industry engagement and connections.	Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga Tuvalu, Vanuatu + Timor-Leste	Advocate
4	Support the Regional Development Australia Tropical North (RDATN) led Indo-Pacific Technical Work Group (TWG) to progress their TNQ Indo-Pacific Engagement Strategy 2025-2028 through active participation in the TWG.	Open	Partner

Table 1 – Summary of Priority Pacific Opportunities (cont'd)

#	Opportunity	Country Focus	Council's Role
5	Investigate opportunities to support the Australian Government's Sports Diplomacy Strategy, including through hosting training camps, events and development pathways for Pacific athletes, coaches and sports administrators based in Cairns.	Open	Advocate, Facilitator
6	Investigate opportunities to support the successful establishment of the PNG Chiefs National Rugby League (NRL) team in Port Moresby, acknowledging the agreement between the NRL and the Papua New Guinea and Australian Governments for the team to be based in Port Moresby from 'Day 1' but noting Council's readiness to assist where appropriate.	PNG	Advocate
7	Investigate and support further ad-hoc opportunities to increase engagement with the Pacific as and when they arise and where appropriate. Recent examples include Cairns hosting the Lowy-Institute's Aus-PNG Network Emerging Leaders Dialogue and attendance at the Fiji-Australia Business Mission 2026.	Open	Advocate, Partner
Priority sector focus			
8	Support for the expansion of existing Pacific focused training and capacity building programs and related infrastructure across the aviation sector.	Open	Advocate
9	Support for the expansion of existing Pacific focused training and capacity building programs and related infrastructure across the marine/maritime and defence sector.	Open	Advocate
Business to business			
10	Widen the scope of the existing Resource and Performance Agreement with Tradelinked with increased alignment with recommendations in the ASPI report (see Part 2 below for further details).	Fiji, Guam, Palau, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu	Funder

Part 2 – Tradelinked Funding Proposal

Proposal

Tradelinked has submitted a proposal seeking \$70,000 (ex GST) in Council funding per annum for the Option period of 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028 of their current R&P Agreement. This is an increase from the \$20,000 (ex GST) per annum Tradelinked currently receive. The proposed list of activities and associated cost is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 – Summary of proposed activities for period 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028

#	Proposed activity	Amount (\$ ex GST)
1	Facilitate a minimum of two, and maximum of three, 'Brains Trust' meetings per year	2,000
2	Develop industry specific or topic briefings	2,000
3	Preparation of a media/comms strategy to promote initiatives and outcomes	1,000
4	Facilitate a minimum of one, maximum of two, outbound delegations per annum	7,000
5	Facilitate a minimum of one inbound delegation per annum	2,000
6	Deliver a Fiji Business and Investment Forum	20,000
7	Deliver a Bougainville Expo in Cairns	5,000
8	Deliver 16 monthly business networking events (10 in Cairns / 6 in a Pacific country)	4,000
9	Attend a minimum of two major events per annum relating to enhancing Pacific connections (e.g. Business Advantage International Investment Conference, Australia-PNG Business Forum)	5,000
10	Prepare a business case for presentation to Business Advantage to hold annual event in 2028	1,000
11	Facilitate a working group and update business case for direct air services between Lae and Cairns.	20,000
12	Undertake early research on new markets (e.g. Vanuatu, Palau, Guam)	1,000
Total		70,000

Assessment and recommendation

The requested funding increase reflects Tradelinked's desire to widen the scope and reach of its operations. However, Council Officers have assessed the proposal and do not recommend supporting all of the proposed new activities. The two initiatives Officers do not recommend supporting are:

- Facilitate a minimum of two, and maximum of three, 'Brains Trust' meetings per year (Item 1 in Table 2). Support for this initiative is not recommended due to potential duplication with the RDATN's existing Indo-Pacific technical working group.

- Facilitate a working group and updated business case for direct air services between Lae and Cairns (Item 11 in Table 2). While Council supports the concept of direct flights between Cairns and Lae, specific support for this initiative is not recommended due to route development being primarily a matter for Cairns Airport and relevant airlines to consider and progress.

Council Officers have also considered the request for \$20,000 ex GST per annum to deliver a Fiji Business and Investment Forum (Item 6 in Table 2). It is expected this initiative will further capitalise on the new direct flights between Cairns and Fiji to build lasting economic, business and cultural ties. However, due to the untested nature of the event, Council Officers recommend a notional allocation of \$20,000 ex GST per annum be provided for it in the extended R&P Agreement, but that the final allocation towards this initiative (or an alternate initiative/s aligned with the outcomes of the ASPI report) be subject to the submission of further details by Tradelinked and approval by Council Officers.

All of the proposed activities are assessed to align with the ASPI report recommendations.

With consideration of the above, the total recommended funding for Tradelinked for the term of the extension from 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028 is up to \$48,000 ex GST per annum. A summary of the recommended changes to the R&P Agreement are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3 – Tradelinked R&P Agreement recommendations summary

Area	Details
Funding recommendation	<p>Up to \$48,000 ex GST per annum, fixed for the two year (1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028) extension to the current R&P Agreement</p> <p>Of the above, \$20,000 ex GST per annum is notionally allocated to Tradelinked delivering a Fiji Business and Investment Forum each year but noting that the approval of funding for this purpose (or an alternate initiative/s aligned with the outcomes of the ASPI report) is subject to Council Officer approval and in the absence of such approval the funding will not be paid.</p>
Rationale for recommendation	<p>Tradelinked’s proposed new activities align with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council’s Corporate Plan 2025-2030; Robust Economy; Leveraging Cairns’ proximity and connection to our Asia Pacific neighbours. • Council’s Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026; International Relations and Trade; Aviation; Marine and Defence. <p>Tradelinked has demonstrated a track record of delivering outcomes aligned with Council’s plans and has proposed a widened scope of activities which strongly align with Council’s new Corporate Plan and delivers on and is aligned with ASPI’s recommendations noted by Council on 15 October 2025.</p>
KPIs	The KPIs of the R&P Agreement will be updated to include alignment with the outcomes summarised in Table 2 of this report.

OPTIONS:

Option 1 (recommended):

1. Notes the priority opportunities identified to enhance engagement with Pacific Island nations and Council's role in progressing those opportunities as outlined in this report;
2. Approves the amendment and extension of Council's Resource and Performance Agreement with Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated for the period 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2028, with annual funding of up to \$48,000 ex GST; and
3. Delegates authority to the Chief Executive Officer in accordance with the *Local Government Act 2009* to finalise any and all matters associated with the Resource and Performance Agreement.

Option 2:

That Council notes the priority opportunities identified to enhance engagement with Pacific Island nations outlined in this report but **does not** approve the Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated proposal for increased funding at this time.

Option 3:

That Council **does not** note the opportunities identified to enhance engagement with Pacific Island nations outlined in this report and **does not** endorse the Tradelinked Cairns Incorporated proposal for increased funding at this time.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Risk Management:

The overall risk level associated with the proposed activities is assessed as low. Mitigation measures include strong stakeholder engagement undertaken through the ASPI report process, selection of initiatives that can be delivered within existing resource allocations and proposed quarterly meetings with Tradelinked to monitor progress ahead of the annual acquittal report. Council Officers have confirmed alignment between the proposed activities, the Cairns Regional Council Corporate Plan, and the ASPI report recommendations.

Council Finance and the Local Economy:

No additional staffing resources (headcount) are required to deliver the proposed activities. Tradelinked's current R&P funding of \$20,000 (ex GST) per annum is accommodated within Council's existing Economic Development OPEX budget allocation. To support the proposed additional Tradelinked activities, an increase in annual R&P funding to \$48,000 (ex GST) for the remaining two-year option period is recommended and has been incorporated into the draft FY26/27 Economic Development OPEX budget.

Progressing the opportunities highlighted in this report has the potential to deliver enhanced economic benefits for Cairns through increased business interaction and trade

between Cairns and Pacific Island countries.

Community and Cultural Heritage:

Cairns has a culturally inclusive and people-centred foundation that supports deeper cultural exchange with Pacific partners. The proposed opportunities strengthen this foundation by fostering capacity building, knowledge sharing, and community-level connections through existing sister-city relationships, engagement with the PNG diaspora, and opportunities for cultural exchange through sport and other shared activities. Together, these elements build on Cairns' long-standing regional relationships and contribute to enhanced cultural cohesion within the Cairns community.

Corporate and Operational Plans:

The proposed Pacific opportunities and the Tradelinked funding extension align with the following focus areas of Council's Corporate Plan 2025–2030:

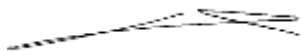
- Focus 1: Robust Economy – Supporting a diversified and growing economy
- Focus 4: Community & Culture – Fostering a vibrant, healthy and inclusive community

Leveraging Cairns' proximity and connection to our Asia–Pacific neighbours is a key strategy within the Corporate Plan 2025-2030. The outcomes of the ASPI work provide a strong evidence base that will help guide Council's approach to Pacific engagement over the coming years.

CONSULTATION:

Targeted consultation was undertaken by ASPI and included State Government, Federal Government, International Organisations, Academia, Non-Governmental Organisations and the Private Sector. Council Officers have also engaged with a number of key stakeholders in the determination of the priority opportunities outlined in this report.

Council Officers also liaised with Tradelinked regarding their proposal for increased funding.



Nick Masasso
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