Chief Minister Clare Martin has welcomed the latest ABS figures which show the NT’s population increased to 199,617 in the 12 months to March this year. However, Ms Martin said a slight decrease in the NT’s population in the March quarter reinforced the significance of developing a 20-year Population Strategy.

While the NT’s population increased by 0.2% in the 12 months to March this year, the latest figures show that in the three months to March 2002 population declined by 0.1%.

"The major reasons behind the population decline in the March quarter are attributed to a large interstate overflow and a decline in net overseas migration," Ms Martin said.

"While this negative trend in interstate migration is concerning, it is likely to eventually reverse as the economy gains momentum and as employment benefits from increased construction activity begin to flow through."

Ms Martin said the Population Strategy Issues Paper, which was released in August for public comment, looked at ways to retain and attract more people to the Territory to help combat a slowing population growth, apparent since the mid 90s.

"In order to build the Territory economically, there is a need to establish of an integrated population plan covering the next 20 years.

"This is the first time a Population Strategy for the Northern Territory has been developed - unlike our predecessors, this Government is determined to take a proactive role in stimulating growth. In particular it has become apparent that the Territory has not fully utilised opportunities to bring in more skilled and business migrants.

"At the Government’s Economic Development Summit last year many people in the business community expressed the belief that a bigger population would automatically bring higher economic growth rates and new opportunities.

"This is what the Population Strategy is all about, and I certainly encourage the community to become involved in an open discussion about Population Policy Strategies."