



13 March 2026

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

State of Australia's aviation sector and its ability to deliver reliable and affordable services to rural, regional and remote communities

As the union representing workers completing Commonwealth (majority being Australian Public Service) or previously Commonwealth work and the Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is committed to providing a strong voice for our members in key public policy and political debates.

The CPSU welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on how the current state of Australia's aviation sector affects the delivery of critical government services in rural, regional and remote communities. Our submission highlights how the current state of the aviation sector in the Northern Territory (NT) is affecting the delivery of public services, and the attraction and retention of skilled workers.

1. Aviation adequacy, security requirements and cost disparities undermine service delivery capacity

Reliable, affordable, and frequent air services are essential enablers of Australian Public Service (APS) and NTPS operations in the NT. High airfare costs, disparities in airport charges, limited route competitiveness and the high costs all contribute to substantial barriers for recruitment, retention and deployment of workers.

In many NT regions, airfare costs routinely exceed those in metropolitan centres, while air services are less frequent and more vulnerable to disruption. CPSU members see the negative impacts to frontline services for government agencies dependent on-air travel - including Services Australia and the NT Government.

The high cost of aviation services directly constrains operational capacity in frontline public services. In Services Australia in Alice Springs, travel budgets quickly evaporate due to high airfare costs. Once the travel budget is exhausted, it becomes difficult to fly in relief staff to Alice Springs which also supports smaller communities such as Yuendumu and Santa Theresa. Which can result in Services Australia staff having to do multiple roles simultaneously due to understaffing.

High aviation costs similarly constrain the operational capacity of the NT Department of Children and Families (DCF). Since the change of government in the NT and subsequent MoGs, DCF has rarely



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flown down relief Child Protection workers from Darwin to Alice Springs, with return flights from Darwin and the NT's second city commonly around \$1,000. This has further limited the department's ability to respond flexibly to workforce shortages.

2. High travel costs reduce the likelihood of workers accepting or remaining in rural, regional and remote NT roles

The NT consistently has the highest labour force participation rate of any jurisdiction, reflecting the central role of employment in attracting and retaining residents. This dynamic contributes to comparatively low unemployment, as people who become unemployed and cannot find work are more likely to leave the Territory.¹

Where air services are unreliable, insecure, or unaffordable, it becomes significantly harder to attract and retain APS and NTPS employees. Workers face:

- High personal travel costs (for relocation, family connection, or required work travel),
- Limited competition on routes, resulting in inflated fares, and
- Essential workplace travel becoming cost prohibitive for agencies.

Aviation costs have an outsized impact in the NT because many in essential roles, such as law enforcement jobs, require frequent movement between remote communities. This applies across other jurisdictions with rural, regional and remote footprints (e.g., Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland), but the NT is uniquely dependent on aviation for workers to do their job and to see their family and loved ones.

Additionally, we have CPSU members on Galiwinku, off the coast of Arnhem Land, who report it costs \$2,000 (\$1,200 being return flights) per person to be able to visit Darwin for an extended weekend, which greatly impacts their relationships with family and friends.

3. Workers incur significant out of pocket travel costs to access essential health services or sudden bereavement

Despite being a major population centre, Darwin is classified as an outer regional location, with healthcare capacity constrained by chronic workforce shortages. Access to primary, specialist, maternity and aged care services is restricted, with long waits common and many residents forced to self-fund interstate travel to get necessary healthcare. These constraints disproportionately affect families, older Territorians, and people with ongoing healthcare needs, contributing to outmigration from the Northern Territory.

The cost of interstate travel for health care can be significant. In one example provided by a CPSU member, they were required to spend more than \$2,000 on travelling interstate alone in 2024 to access specialist care in Sydney for a necessary surgical procedure due to the absence of local services. For the same CPSU member, ongoing treatment for another medical issue also was required to be with interstate specialists, based referrals from local general practitioners in Darwin.

¹ Northern Territory Government, *Labour market*, Northern Territory Economy, Northern Territory Government, accessed 10 March 2026, <https://nteconomy.nt.gov.au/labour-market>.





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Additionally, CPSU members report that airlines no longer provide special bereavement/emergency flights which means last minute return flights to other capital cities following sudden death or illness of family is often over \$1000 return from Darwin and even more from Alice Springs or elsewhere.

Collectively, these systemic constraints impose significant financial and personal costs on residents and contribute to outmigration from the Northern Territory, particularly among families and those with ongoing healthcare needs.

4. Resulting labour shortages create persistent job vacancies and reduced service delivery

The Northern Territory's small and mobile labour market drives intense competition for skilled workers and reliance on interstate recruitment. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that 10 per cent of the Territory's workforce changed jobs in the past 12 months.²

Consequently, employers dependent on skilled workers such as the NTPS experience high staff turnover. In 2024–25, the NTPS separation rate was 24 per cent,³ compared with 6.4 per cent in the APS.⁴ Attraction and retention are made more difficult by low aviation adequacy combined with high travel cost burdens as it is:

- Driving higher vacancy rates,
- Increasing turnover, and
- Making it more difficult to attract skilled workers from interstate.

Many essential services become harder to sustain when workers cannot reliably reach the communities they serve or have the option to travel back to visit loved ones. For example, the NT Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development has had very long-term vacancies for vital Aboriginal Interpreter Services in remote communities such as at Nhulunbuy, Katherine and Tennant Creek with this agency's work being vital for the functioning of other government services (i.e. Courts, Law Enforcement, Health). This contributes to service delays, reduced continuity, and unequal access for regional and remote Australians.

5. NTPS workers' limited access to flexible work compounds the problem

APS enterprise agreements have strong, negotiated rights to flexible work, featuring a "bias towards yes" for working from home (WFH) requests, with no set caps on WFH days. Unlike the APS, CPSU members in the NTPS workers have far more restricted access to WFH and hybrid arrangements. This means aviation barriers cannot be mitigated through remote work solutions for NTPS employees.

In the NTPS, workers must be physically present far more often, making the cost and unreliability of

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Job mobility, February 2025*, ABS, released 29 July 2025, accessed 10 March 2026, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/jobs/job-mobility/latest-release>.

³ Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment (NT), *State of the Service Report 2024–25*, Northern Territory Government, tabled 23 October 2025, accessed 10 March 2026, <https://ocpe.nt.gov.au/workforce-planning/state-of-service-report>.

⁴ Australian Public Service Commission, *State of the Service Report 2024–25: APS workforce*, Commonwealth of Australia, published 26 November 2025, accessed 10 March 2026, <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/research-analysis-and-publications/state-service/state-service-report-2024-25/aps-workforce>.



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aviation services even more prohibitive. This amplifies recruitment and retention challenges and further limits service capability across remote regions.

6. Conclusion

Aviation affordability and reliability are not simply transport issues they are critical determinants of government service delivery in the Northern Territory.

A safe, reliable, and affordable aviation sector is essential to deliver equitable, high quality government services across the Northern Territory and other rural, regional and remote jurisdictions. Addressing disparities in cost and competitiveness is not optional - it is fundamental to service delivery, workforce sustainability, and community wellbeing.

The CPSU is happy to provide further information regarding any of the matters raised in this submission and supplementary information on other relevant issues.

If you require further information, please contact me, via email at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely,

Suwan Adamson
CPSU NT Regional Secretary