

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into Australia's aviation sector, particularly its ability to provide reliable and affordable services to rural, regional and remote communities. For those living far from metropolitan centres, air travel is not a discretionary expense—it is the sole means of accessing healthcare, maintaining family connections, pursuing education, and participating in the broader Australian community.

The challenges are most acute in places like Lord Howe Island, where a community of around 350 residents is entirely dependent on a single airline for transport. Escalating fares and the absence of competition have created a situation where many residents cannot afford to leave the island for essential medical care, family responsibilities, or urgent travel needs. This submission highlights the human, social and economic impact of high regional airfares under a monopoly service and underscores the urgent need for stronger government support and equitable national aviation policy.

The disparity between metropolitan and remote regional fare pricing has widened dramatically in recent years. A sale fare between Sydney and Melbourne can be as low as **\$49**, yet the same-distance flight from Sydney to Lord Howe Island routinely exceeds **\$600**, with peak one-way fares surpassing **\$1000**. Such pricing has moved from expensive to prohibitive.

For families, these costs accumulate rapidly. A simple return trip for two people can surpass a full fortnight's income for some households. It is not uncommon for residents to go years without leaving the island, despite needing medical follow-ups, family reconnection, or essential mainland services.

Lord Howe Island is serviced by a single airline, which without competition, there is no incentive to reduce prices, improve flexibility, or consider the unique needs of remote communities. Residents have little or no ability to plan travel around affordability. The lack of options also leaves the community vulnerable to disruptions, scheduling changes, and ongoing fare inflation.

The absence of alternative transport—no ferry, no road access—means that air travel is not merely one option among many; it is the only option.

Airfares directly affect health outcomes. Many doctors or dental appointments are not covered under the IPTAAS scheme, leaving residents to bear the entire travel cost. For families with chronic conditions requiring multiple appointments each year, this burden is financially devastating.

Residents are forced to postpone or cancel vital medical care, not because of preference, but because the airfare is simply unaffordable. High airfares do not just affect finances—they affect community wellbeing.

Parents of children attending boarding school cannot afford visits to see their children play sport, attend presentations or receive awards. Elderly residents are cut off from family on the mainland. Important life events—births, illnesses, celebrations and losses—become inaccessible.

Friends and extended family who might otherwise visit cannot justify the cost of travel when fares exceed \$1000 one-way. The emotional toll of this isolation is profound. A community that depends so heavily on connection to mainland Australia is slowly being priced out of that connection.

Alignment with the Terms of Reference

(a) Costs, fees, levies, taxes and charges that form the pricing of airfares

Remote routes face a range of federally mandated costs and levies that do not scale appropriately to small airports and extremely low passenger volumes. These costs disproportionately affect communities like Lord Howe Island. The current structure effectively penalises remoteness.

(e) Competitiveness and the implications of service withdrawal

The lack of competition on monopoly routes exposes remote communities to price escalation and service vulnerability. Withdrawal or reduction of services—whether due to operational decisions or commercial considerations—would leave the community stranded. Essential travel should not be at the mercy of commercial viability alone.

(f) & (g) Adequacy of government fees, levies and processes to quantify costs

Government mechanisms to assess and allocate aviation-related costs often assume scale and volume that remote communities simply cannot meet. Remote locations require funding mechanisms that recognise their structural disadvantages, not cost models that inadvertently deepen them.

(h) Policy measures that could assist aviation delivery in rural, regional and remote communities

This inquiry represents an opportunity to adopt proven international approaches that ensure remote communities remain connected and supported. Many comparable nations have long recognised air travel as essential infrastructure, not a luxury, and have built support models accordingly.

Behind each airfare is a deeply personal story:

Parents missing school events.

Residents delaying medical treatment.

Families unable to reunite.

Young people returning home less often because the cost is too high.

Elders living in emotional isolation because loved ones cannot afford to visit.

These are not inconveniences. They are fundamental barriers to health, wellbeing, dignity, and equality.

Lord Howe Island residents are proud, resilient, and tightly connected. But resilience alone cannot compensate for structural inequities in our aviation system. Without government action to create a fairer, more supportive framework, remote communities will continue to shoulder a burden that no Australian should have to bear.

High regional airfares, particularly on remote and monopolised routes, pose serious risks to community sustainability, mental and physical health, educational access, and social connection. Remote Australians deserve the same opportunities for health, family connection and mobility as those living on the mainland.

Australia must acknowledge that for remote regions, air travel is essential infrastructure. With stronger government support—aligned with successful international models—these communities can remain connected, healthy, and viable.

I thank you for taking my submission and hope that all our small voices are heard,

Regards

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