Indigenous Consumer
Assistance Network Ltd.

20 February 2026

Productivity Commission
Inquiry into Regional Airfares

Via email: regional.airfares@pc.gov.au

**Submission to the Productivity Commission – Inquiry into Regional Airfares**
**Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network (ICAN)**

The Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network (ICAN) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into regional airfares.

**About ICAN**

ICAN delivers financial wellbeing services to First Nations peoples and the broader community across North and Far North Queensland. Our vision is:

Empowered consumers. Strong communities. Fair economies.

The people we work alongside are strong, resilient, and deeply knowledgeable about their lives and communities. However, structural barriers and uncompetitive markets in remote and regional areas create conditions in which financial exclusion and exploitation can occur.

Communities across north Queensland experience:

- Unacceptably high costs of living, with food and basic necessities significantly more expensive than in metropolitan and large regional centres
- Limited employment opportunities and economic volatility, including vulnerability to pandemics, industry downturns and extreme weather events
- Severe housing shortages, overcrowding and high rates of homelessness
- Poor and unreliable digital and telecommunications infrastructure, contributing to digital and financial exclusion
- Heavy reliance on private vehicles as the only viable form of transport, creating substantial upfront and ongoing financial pressures

Within this context, the cost and availability of regional air travel has significant economic and social consequences.

**High cost of regional and remote air travel**

The very high cost of airfares between remote communities and regional centres places air travel beyond the financial reach of many of the people we assist. As a result, people are often forced to rely on long-distance vehicle travel; where roads exist and are accessible. Many communities are only accessible by road during the dry season.

For many Cape York and Torres Strait communities, Cairns is the nearest regional centre. Distances range between approximately 500 km and 1,000 km. Travel to Cairns is critical for:

- Accessing specialist health care
- Attending funerals and participating in sorry business
- Visiting family
- Accessing financial and government services
- Purchasing essential goods, including vehicles

ICAN is frequently contacted by individuals seeking assistance to raise funds for themselves or family members to attend funerals in other communities. The cost of flights is often the primary barrier.

A review of flight costs between:

- Kowanyama and Cairns
- Lockhart River and Cairns
- Bamaga and Cairns

indicates return fares of up to $1,000.

By comparison, return flights on the same travel dates between:

- Cairns and Brisbane
- Cairns and Sydney
- Cairns and Melbourne

range between approximately $500 and $650.

As the Commission has noted, travel between remote and regional communities can cost substantially more than travel between regional centres and capital cities.

In addition to price, limited flight frequency and seat availability present further challenges. While higher demand for capital city routes may justify greater frequency, in practice it is often extremely difficult for individuals, families and small community organisations to secure seats on required dates unless booked many months in advance. Advance planning is rarely possible when travel is required for urgent health needs or cultural obligations such as funerals. Larger organisations may have the administrative capacity to plan and manage bookings well ahead of time; individuals and small community services typically do not.

**Impact on service delivery**

ICAN receives Queensland Government funding to employ three staff to deliver financial counselling and financial capability services across Cape York and the Torres Strait. However,

funding is treated the same as it would in an urban centre where costs of travel incurred by services is limited. For this reason, funding is generally limited to staffing and does not adequately account for the substantial cost of travel required to deliver face-to-face services across remote communities. High airfare costs and limited seat availability directly constrain our ability to deliver services in the communities we are funded to support.

As a not-for-profit community organisation operating within tight funding parameters, we must absorb travel costs within existing budgets. In practice, this means:

- Reduced capacity to travel
- Fewer in-person service visits
- Greater reliance on telephone and video conferencing

For many of the people we assist, remote service delivery is not an adequate substitute. Given that the people we assist are often experiencing multiple vulnerabilities, including living in areas with unreliable telecommunication and digital networks, being unable to provide face to face services creates a significant barrier to accessing our critical services. In these circumstances, face-to-face engagement is often critical to achieving meaningful outcomes.

**Case example: Palm Island**

ICAN provides weekly services to Palm Island, which is accessible only by ferry, barge or plane. For community members, flight costs are often unaffordable, leaving the 1.5 hour ferry as the only viable option for travel to the mainland.

For ICAN, two return flights per week result in an annual expenditure of approximately $20,000; representing around 20% of total expenditure for our Palm Island service delivery.
Flights to the island are limited and typically must be booked well in advance. Cancellations frequently occur due to weather conditions or sorry business on the Island, which we must respect for cultural reasons. To manage this uncertainty, we are often required to purchase more expensive flexible fares to avoid losing funds when changes arise.
While we acknowledge the high standard of customer service provided by regional operators, the structural cost and availability constraints remain significant barriers.

**Conclusion**

The issues raised in this inquiry are complex and may not lend themselves to simple solutions. However, from ICAN's experience, high regional airfare costs have a profound and disproportionate impact on:

- Individuals in remote communities seeking to meet essential cultural, health and family obligations; and
- Community-based service organisations attempting to deliver critical services face-to-face.

We encourage the Commission to consider the lived experience of remote communities; the funding limitations of community services supporting those communities; and the compounding effect of airfare costs within already high-cost and structurally constrained environments.

ICAN appreciates the opportunity to contribute this perspective to the inquiry. Please contact Jillian Williams at ICAN on 0488 225 527 or at jillian.williams@ican.org.au if further information would assist.

Kind regards

Aaron Davis
CEO/Managing Director

This submission is endorsed by CHOICE.