

## **Submission – Determinants of Regional Airfares enquiry**

### **Background**

I have been resident of Galiwin'ku, on Elcho Island NT, since November 2024 and my husband relocated to be with me from May 2025. Unfortunately, due to the prohibitive cost of airfares just to get to Darwin, it is likely our time here may not extend past May 2026, although we are both enjoying living and working on the island.

As a very remote island, our only option is to fly. While some residents use boats to get to the mainland, there is then no way to travel to Darwin from where a boat can land. In addition, there is no regular, public barge service to the island with the only barge being a weekly one, when weather allows, specifically for freight.

There are only two air services that go to Darwin. They are Airnorth, who we tend to fly with, and Fly Tiwi. The Fly Tiwi flights are always \$1,408 return so we can usually obtain Airnorth seats cheaper than that.

### **Cost of travel**

We recently travelled to Perth and Melbourne to visit families. Our return airfares from Elcho Island to Darwin (just over 500km by air) were \$897 each, even though we booked them 4 months in advance. In comparison, our flights from Darwin to Perth, Melbourne then return to Darwin (total just under \$8,500km) booked on the same day with Qantas were \$1297 each.

Deciding to have a break in Darwin last August, booking one month in advance, we paid \$1361 each for return flights from Elcho Island. This makes it very difficult to have a break off-island to ensure ongoing mental wellness and to connect with cultural and general entertainment activities.

The only affordable option, flight-wise, to have a short break off-island is to fly to Nhulunbuy (Gove) with MAF at a cost of \$700 return. However, the costs of accommodation and car hire in Nhulunbuy makes this an expensive option.

### **Options**

Airnorth offer a Gove Locals fare, available to anyone who lives within a 50km radius of Nhulunbuy and provides for 6 return fares per year, at a reduced cost. Details are below:

#### **Gove Locals Fare**

*Registered and verified locals can fly from Gove to Darwin return for just \$463\*.*

*We're excited to offer residents of Gove the opportunity to take advantage of our Locals Fare, providing discounted return airfares all year round, with no blackout periods. This special program is designed to make regional travel more affordable for you and your family, helping you explore and connect without the high costs.*

I have contacted Airnorth to enquire about a similar arrangement for Galiwin'ku but have had no response. In addition, Airnorth flights from Gove to Darwin are Qantas-linked, but the flights from Elcho Island to Darwin are not. I have also enquired about this, have likewise had no response.

I believe there should be more government support of airlines operating in very remote locations, where flight is the only option to leave community.

### **Benefit to very remote communities**

One of the issues with non-locals working in very remote communities, such as teachers, shire and government employees, is isolation from family and friends. If it was not so expensive to get to Darwin, I know my husband and myself, both senior government staff, would have no hesitation remaining in community for much longer. Both of us are in roles that had been vacant for over 8 months, for this reason. We are very conflicted about leaving community as we are both making a positive impact, however with grandchildren in Melbourne we are likely to relocate sometime this year.

I know a lot of non-local staff only remain on community for 1 – 2 years for much the same reason, due to missing connection to their family and friends. Having cheaper flights between Elcho Island and Darwin would broaden options and ensure many would stay on community for a longer period, with the inherent benefits that comes with longer-term associations.

In addition, a lot of services provided in community are based in Darwin or further afield. Having more affordable flights would allow these services to employ more local Yolngu staff, rather than having to spend so much just on travel to community. It would also allow reallocation of resources to other areas, such as equipment purchase, which would be of great benefit to the community.

Finally, being in such a remote environment, the cost of travel significantly impacts local (Yolngu) residents ability to go to work, study, sport or cultural events off community. While there is significant support for individuals to do this, with the local school providing enormous support, there are limited opportunities for adults to be so engaged. Further engagement across all age groups in community with organisations in other locations would significantly support community development and Yolngu self-determination.