



DARWIN RACING

10 March 2026

Productivity Commission  
Inquiry into the Determinants of Regional Airfares  
Canberra ACT

Dear Commissioners

**Submission – Inquiry into the Determinants of Regional Airfares**

Please find attached a submission from the Darwin Turf Club Incorporated to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Determinants of Regional Airfares.

The Darwin Turf Club conducts thoroughbred racing in Darwin and hosts the annual Darwin Cup Carnival, one of the Northern Territory's largest major events and a significant contributor to the Territory's visitor economy.

This submission provides a practical perspective from a regional event organiser operating in a geographically remote jurisdiction where aviation access plays an important role in enabling interstate visitation. Darwin's relatively small population base means the local market for major events is inherently limited. As a result, the continued growth of events such as the Darwin Cup Carnival increasingly relies on interstate visitors who must travel by air.

The Club's experience highlights how airfare levels and aviation capacity into the Northern Territory can influence visitor travel decisions and, in turn, affect attendance at major regional events. The Darwin Turf Club appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Commission's inquiry and would be pleased to provide further information if required.

Yours sincerely

Carol Need  
Chair



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### **Submission to the Productivity Commission**

#### **Inquiry into the Determinants of Regional Airfares**

**Submitted by:**

Darwin Turf Club Incorporated  
Darwin, Northern Territory

**Date:** 10 March 2026

#### **Key Points**

The Darwin Cup Carnival is one of the Northern Territory's largest annual events and a significant contributor to the Territory's visitor economy.

Darwin has a relatively small population base, meaning the local market for major events is inherently limited.

The Darwin Cup already attracts a very high level of participation from the local population compared with similar events in larger jurisdictions.

Future growth in attendance is therefore likely to depend increasingly on interstate visitors, making aviation access an important enabling factor for the continued growth of major events in the Northern Territory.

#### **Introduction**

The Darwin Turf Club appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Determinants of Regional Airfares.

The Darwin Turf Club conducts thoroughbred racing in Darwin and hosts the annual Darwin Cup Carnival, which is one of the Northern Territory's largest major events.

This submission provides a practical perspective from an event organiser operating in a regional jurisdiction where aviation access plays an important role in enabling interstate visitation.

The Club does not seek to provide a technical analysis of aviation markets. Instead, this submission outlines how airfare levels and aviation access can influence attendance at major regional events.

#### **The Darwin Cup Carnival**

The Darwin Cup Carnival is held each August and consists of a series of race meetings culminating in the Darwin Cup.

Darwin Cup Day regularly attracts crowds approaching 10,000 patrons, making it one of the largest annual public events in the Northern Territory.

The Carnival attracts interstate visitors including racing industry participants, corporate hospitality groups, media representatives and tourists travelling to the Northern Territory for the event.



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The event also generates activity for local hospitality businesses, accommodation providers, tourism operators and transport services during the peak dry-season tourism period.

Accommodation providers commonly report high occupancy levels during the Carnival period, reflecting the importance of major events in supporting the Territory's visitor economy.

### **Darwin's Population and the Local Market**

Darwin is a relatively small capital city by Australian standards.

The population of Darwin is approximately 160,000 people. When those under 18 years of age are excluded, the estimated adult population is approximately 122,000 people.

Attendance at the Darwin Cup can approach 10,000 patrons on race day.

Even before accounting for interstate visitors, this represents approximately 8 per cent of Darwin's adult population attending a single event. This level of participation is unusually high by national standards.

In practice, the available local audience is smaller than the headline adult population suggests.

Participation in major public events may be influenced by factors such as:

- defence personnel and transient residents rotating through the Territory
- fly-in fly-out and contract workers who may not be present during the Carnival period
- hospitality and shift workers working across the peak tourism season
- older demographics less likely to attend large race-day events
- individuals who choose not to attend racing events for personal, cultural or religious reasons.

When these factors are considered, the realistic entertainment and events market in Darwin is materially smaller than the headline adult population.

Against this backdrop, the Darwin Cup already captures a substantial share of the available local market.

### **Participation Compared with Larger Jurisdictions**

On a proportional basis, the Darwin Cup attracts a larger share of the surrounding population than comparable race events in larger Australian jurisdictions.

Major metropolitan race events are supported by much larger population bases and therefore rely on a smaller proportion of local residents attending.

By contrast, the Darwin Cup's attendance relative to the size of Darwin's population represents a very high level of local participation.

This highlights an important structural characteristic of regional events in smaller jurisdictions: the local market can be reached relatively quickly.



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### **Importance of Interstate Visitors**

Given Darwin's relatively small population base, further growth in attendance at the Darwin Cup Carnival is likely to depend increasingly on interstate visitors.

This includes:

- visitors travelling to Darwin specifically for the Carnival
- corporate hospitality groups
- racing industry participants from southern jurisdictions.

The Northern Territory's tourism sector more broadly relies on interstate and international visitors due to the relatively small local population base.

For this reason, aviation access plays an important role in enabling visitor participation in major events.

### **Aviation Access and Visitor Travel Decisions**

Darwin is geographically distant from Australia's major population centres.

For example, the distance between Darwin and Melbourne is approximately 3,100 kilometres, and travel by road would take more than 30 hours.

As a result, aviation is effectively the only practical means of interstate travel for most visitors attending events in the Northern Territory.

The cost of travel to Darwin can therefore influence whether interstate visitors choose to attend major events.

Industry participants travelling from southern capital cities during the Carnival period have reported return airfare costs in the order of \$2,000-\$2,400, in addition to accommodation costs of up to \$600 per night for that period.

When combined with broader cost-of-living pressures across Australia, these costs can influence travel decisions for potential visitors considering attendance at regional events.

### **Regional Events and the Visitor Economy**

Major events such as the Darwin Cup Carnival support a range of businesses across the Darwin economy.

These include:

- hospitality venues
- accommodation providers
- tourism operators
- transport services
- event suppliers and contractors.



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Events held during the dry season contribute to tourism activity and help attract visitors to the Northern Territory.

Reliable and accessible aviation services therefore play an important enabling role in supporting regional events and the broader visitor economy.

### **Concluding Comments**

The Darwin Turf Club's experience as an organiser of one of the Northern Territory's largest events demonstrates the importance of aviation access for regional tourism and events.

The Darwin Cup already captures a substantial share of the available local market. Future growth in attendance is therefore likely to depend increasingly on interstate visitors.

Airfare levels and aviation capacity into the Northern Territory can influence travel decisions for those visitors and may affect the growth potential of major regional events.

The Darwin Turf Club appreciates the opportunity to provide this practical industry perspective to the Commission's inquiry.

### **Further Information**

The Darwin Turf Club would be pleased to provide additional information to assist the Commission, including further detail on visitor attendance patterns, interstate participation and the operational experience of delivering a major regional event in Northern Australia.