South Australia's

Regional Air Services

The Way Forward

A POLICY PROPOSAL

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INDEX

1.0 POLICY PROPOSAL

A call on the State and Federal Governments to,

1.0 Fund intrastate air services using Adelaide's public transport bus contract model. Fares for intrastate air travel would be based on the recovery of 25% of the full costs.

2.0 Provide regular scheduled intrastate air services to meet demand on the following routes.

i. **Adelaide - Port Lincoln**
ii. **Adelaide - Ceduna**
iii. **Adelaide - Whyalla**
iv. **Adelaide - Coober Pedy**
v. **Adelaide - Port Augusta/ Port Pirie**
vi. **Adelaide - Renmark**
vii. **Adelaide - Mount Gambier**
viii. **Adelaide – Kingscote**

3.0 Fund the Development, Safety and Maintenance costs of regional airports. With the Councils being responsible for undertaking the day-to-day operations of the airports.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Industry Commission implemented a comprehensive review of intrastate air travel. At that time, Victoria, South Australia, the ACT, and the Northern Territory had open skies. Other States had some form of regulation. Because of the 1995 National Competition Policy, all Australian States then had deregulated intrastate air travel.

Ansett's collapse in 2001 and 2002 had a profound effect on governments' attitudes to interstate aviation. In particular:

- *New South Wales (re)regulated routes with passenger volumes of up to 50 000 passengers per year (late 2002)*
- *Queensland established new air service contracts for certain regional routes (mid 2001)*
- *Western Australia abandoned its intention to remove licensing on a number of routes and, instead, extended licences on offer (late 2002)*
- *South Australia, for the first time, passed legislation to enable regulation of certain regional routes (late 2002).* (11)

Over the last 25 years, more than half the regional Regular Public (air*) Transport routes and more than half the* (air) *operators have been lost due to cost pressures, changing demographics and a government policy vacuum*. (7)

The Federal Government's Aviation White Paper 2024 recognises the importance of regional air travel. *Safe, affordable and reliable air services are vital for regional and remote Australia, connecting people to family, community, and the services they need to maintain and improve their standard of living. Australian aviation grew from the necessity of servicing remote and regional Australia by air, and this remains critical today.* (8)

The Federal Government is to be applauded for requiring the Productivity Commission to conduct a review of the determinants of regional airfares in Australia and make recommendations on policy settings to support a competitive, reliable and affordable regional aviation network. Competition should not necessarily mean open skies. There is another mechanism which will be addressed in this paper

Such reviews previously seem to have ignored the fact that the country regions are major drivers of the nation's economic growth. And residents of the country regions should not continue to be disadvantaged by inadequate essential services and inadequate connectivity.

South Australia is unique, as major regional towns on the Eyre Peninsula have road travel times to Adelaide that are 4 to 7 times greater than air travel. Further, Mount Gambier has a road/air travel time ratio of 4.0 and has alternative competitive bus and air options to Melbourne. In both cases, the cost of bus and air are both greater than an airfare to Melbourne.

Consequently, the current national review may not deliver outcomes that suit South Australia, hence the preparation of this paper.

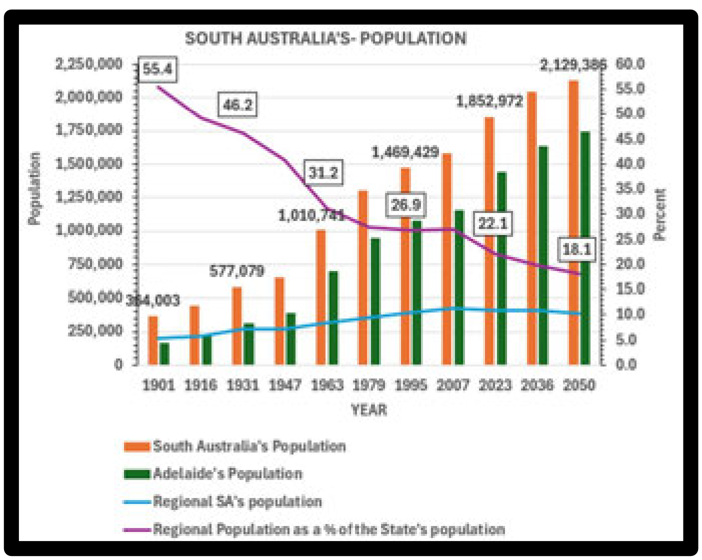
3.0 THE COUNTRY REGIONS

The map of South Australia shows that country regions comprise the majority (98.6%) of the State.

For the development of our State, it is a reasonable objective to have and implement a policy that ensures most of the regional population is within two hours' travel time from the Capital City, Adelaide.

3.1 Population

In June 2025, South Australia's population reached 1,902,665, which is 6.9% of the nation's population. Earlier, in 1970, it reached a high of 9.4% of the nation's population. [4] **Such a decrease has reduced our political power in Canberra. Also, compared to most other states, our economic status has declined, but this is not necessarily related to the decline in our share of the national population.**



In 1901, South Australia's country regions comprised over 50% of the state's population; since then, South Australia has progressively become Adelaide-centric.

In 2025, Greater Adelaide's population was 1,491,015, while the regions comprised 411,650 (21.6% of the State), of which 305,000 (16.0% of the State) lived in the country regions. Current trends indicate that by 2050 the population of the regions could fall further to 18%.

3.2 A Brief History of Regional Transport

3.2.1 Rail

Rail transport played a significant role in the 1900s for both freight and passenger services. An extensive broad-gauge network extended beyond the metropolitan area through the Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu Peninsula, Barossa, and the Adelaide Plains. This network also extended into the Riverland. The rail line to Mount Gambier became a part of the network when it was converted to broad gauge.

On the Eyre Peninsula, a narrow-gauge network extended from Port Lincoln to Penong on the west coast and to Buckleboo just north of Kimba.

With the handover of all regional rail lines to the Federal Government in 1975, most of these regional rail services gradually closed.

3.2.2 Sea

Ketches enabled trade between South Australian coastal towns from the 1800s to about 1970. These vessels carried supplies, freight and passengers.

The Troubridge, a roll-on, roll-off vessel, provided passenger and freight services to Kingscote and Port Lincoln from 1968 to the end of 1970.

3.2.3 Buses

As the South Australian road network grew and rail passenger services declined, regional bus services to most country towns were introduced to serve both passengers and freight.

Recently, the South Australian Government let contracts for 19 Regional Bus Services. There were two separate contracts: one for $71.9 m over 11 years and the other for $ 220.5 m over 12 years. In 2026/27 dollars, this amounts to an expenditure of $72.00 per regional population per annum. These contracts expire in 2035. [14,16]

From an equity viewpoint, it is important to note the **Net Cost** of providing Bus and Rail Services in the Adelaide Metropolitan Area in 2026/27 is budgeted at $458.62* million (* regional bus and taxi expenditure has been excluded). This amounts to an annual expenditure of $307.00 per person in the metropolitan area. [14,16]

In addition, the residents of Mount Gambier have access to bus/rail transport to Melbourne. At the time of writing, the cost of bus/rail transport to Melbourne is 6.3% of the Adelaide bus fare.

3.2.4 Intra-state Regional Air Services

Since 1928 there have been regular air services to many South Australian country towns. For various periods of time there have been services from Adelaide to Ceduna, Cleve, Coober Pedy, Cowell, Kingscote (KI), Kimba, Kingston, Millicent, Minnipa, Mount Gambier, Naracoorte, Port Augusta, Port Lincoln, Port Pirie, Radium Hill, Renmark, Whyalla, and Woomera. (10,13)

The regional towns in the adjacent table have had air services for a long period of time. Except for Port Augusta (service ceased in 2020), all the other towns have continued to maintain regular scheduled air services.

REGIONAL INTRASTATE FLIGHTS FROM/TO ADELAIDE

Town	Earliest Date of Data	End Date of Service	Comment on the Flights 2010 to 2024 Approx. No. of Flights in/out per annum
Ceduna	1985	Continuous	600 to 450, a decline in seats
Coober Pedy	1985	Continuous	Declining 300 to 150
Kingscote	1985	Continuous	1100 to 500, a decline in seats
Mount Gambier	1985	Continuous	Stable 1000 to 900
Port Augusta	1985	2020	Declined 600 to 250
Port Lincoln	1985	Continuous	3800 to 3300, a decline in seats
Whyalla	1985	Continuous	1400 to 1000, seats relatively stable. A 40% increase in seats from 2015 to 2019

SOURCE: https://view.officeapps.live.com/ and more recent data

With respect to Mount Gambier, residents are well served by two regular scheduled air services, one to Adelaide and the other to Melbourne.

All these regional airports have short runways. The longest runways at each airport range from 1428 metres to 1815 metres. These runways cannot normally accommodate interstate commercial aeroplanes such as the Boeing 737 Max, which requires a take-off runway length of 2,135 metres –at maximum take-off weight. (2) Thus, regional intra-state flights are restricted to aeroplanes like the Dash 8-400, 74 to 78 seats. (3)

3.2.5 Regional Travel Time and the Cost

Residents of country regional towns have many reasons that influence the need to travel to Adelaide. Personal and family relationships, theatre, arts, sporting events, education, health, travel and the fact that the towns do not have all the facilities of Adelaide.

Because of the state's geography, South Australia is unique, as major regional towns on the Eyre Peninsula have road travel times to Adelaide that are 4 to 7 times greater than air travel. Further, Mount Gambier has a road/air travel time ratio of 4.0 and has alternative competitive bus and air options to Melbourne. Road travel from a country regional town to Adelaide could take from nearly 3 hours to over 8 hours. Kangaroo Island is connected by ferry from Penneshaw to Cape Jervis, and then by road. The costs of bus and air travel in most cases are greater than the cost of an airfare from Adelaide to Melbourne.

The table below provides a comparison of the time and the current cost of travel by bus and air services.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA REGIONAL POPULATION , TRAVEL DISTANCE & TIME

Region		Adelaide to Regional Town						
		Road		Air		Cost of Travel AT JULY 2026		
Town	Population	Distance Km	Travel Time hour minutes	Air Distance Km	Minutes	Bus Fares as % of Melbourne Airfares	Bus Fares plus VOT as % of Melbourne Airfares	Regional Air fares as % of Melbourne Airfares
Port Lincoln	15,065	651	6 h 54 m	255	60	101%	209%	167%
Whyalla	21,720	385	4 h 10 m	240	50	56%	122%	152%
Ceduna	3,757	775	8 h 12 m	545	90	118%	247%	286%
Coober Pedy	1,526	848	8 h 40 m	740	120	196%	333%	302%
Port Augusta	14,469	309	3 h 26 m	280	66	50%	105%	
Port Pirie	17664	228	2 h 36 m	205	48	40%	81%	
Renmark	10,274	260	2 h 55 m	215	50	47%	93%	
Mount Gambier	28,057	440	4 h 48 m	380	70	68%	144%	223%
Kingscote (Kangaroo Island)	5,212	105 Plus Ferry	2 h 30m	120	40	58%	97%	151%

SOURCE: Population ABS Regional Population 2024-25
Distance information from Google Maps and Airlines
The Cost of Travel has been derived from Intrastate Bus Companies, Qantas and Rex Airlines. Cost Comparison with Virgin, based on booking in July 2026 a month in advance. Virgin chosen as it was the mid-priced airline.
VOT: Value of time 40% of Average Full Adult wage ABS6302.0 escalated to June 2026 equals $20.80 per hour

A one-way bus fare to Adelaide ranges from 196% to 40% of the cost of an airfare to Melbourne. When the value of time of travel ($20.8/hour) is considered and added to the fare, then the “total cost” ranges from 333% to 81% of an airfare to Melbourne. [6]

A one-way airfare from country regional towns to Adelaide ranges in cost from 301% to 151% of a Melbourne airfare.

For country regional towns, the time and cost of both air and road travel, whether by bus or private car, impede connectivity, impede the travel of residents, availability of services, and the development and growth of the town.

The Minister, in his foreword to the Regional Plan 2026, states *the Plan ensures our land use and infrastructure keep pace, creating strong, connected communities with the services and amenities they need. It is a plan or a more resilient, prosperous and connected regions that supports sustainable growth, protects the natural environment, and enhances liveability for generations to come. ....It is a plan for resilient, prosperous and connected regions that support sustainable growth, protect the natural environment, and enhance liveability for generations to come.* [17]

Connected regions will lead to social cohesion. This is the ‘glue’ that connects societal members. *Societies with higher levels of social cohesion are documented as generally being healthier, more resilient to external shocks and crises, and experiencing higher economic growth.* [9]

Regional connectivity requires a multifaceted approach. Improving the availability of intrastate air services through subsidising air fares is one approach that would directly assist the Minister’s plan.

3.4 Economic Contribution of the Regions

The South Australian country regions are economic drivers of the State through agriculture, horticulture, wine, fishing, aquaculture, forestry, mining, manufacturing and tourism. Each region's strengths are shown in the above table.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S REGIONS			
Region	Population	Area Square Kilometres	Major Industries
Eyre Peninsula	59,207	231,122	Agriculture, Fishing, and Mining.
Far North	26,346	629,252	Mining, Agriculture, and Tourism.
Kangaroo Island	5,125	4,400	Agriculture, Fishing, Forestry, and Tourism
Limestone Coast	66,946	21,332	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Manufacturing.
Murraylands and Riverland	71,236	54,101	Agriculture, Horticulture, Wine Services, and Tourism.
Yorke and Mid North	76,471	34,849	Agriculture, Wine production, Aquaculture, and Mining.
Total	305,331	970,656	SOURCE: Regional Development South Australia

In 2024, the farm-gate production of the regions was $8,419 million dollars. With added value, this contribution increases to $16,270 million. The table to the right shows the contribution of each sector of the regional economy. {The farm gate outcome for 2024-25 was $2.4 billion (14.7%) lower than the return in 202-23}.

South Australia Revenue from Farm, Forestry and Fishery $AUD Million			
	Farm Gate	Value Added	Total Revenue
Field crops	2,391	1,859	4,250
Livestock	2,436	1,694	4,130
Horticulture	1,581	679	2,260
Wool	375	5	380
Winegrapes	577	1,663	2,240
Seafood*	443	57	500
Forestry^	280	1,320	1,600
Dairy	336	424	760
Other Food			150
TOTAL	8,419	7,851	16,270

*Data subject to revision ^ Data for 23-24
SOURCE: South Australian Primary Industries Scorecard 2024-25, Government of South Australia

In 2024-25, the total value of overseas exports of primary industries and associated processing was $7.7 billion. (19)

In addition, the region's mining is a very important driver of the State's economy. In June 2025, mining in South Australia contributed $12.4 billion to the State, and $404.5 million in royalties. (4,15)

It is without question that the South Australian country regions are economic drivers of the State. The Government must greatly improve services and funding to the country regions.

4.0 REGIONAL AIR SERVICES--THE WAY FORWARD

4.1 Importance of Regional Aviation and the Need for Change

Safe, affordable and reliable air services are vital for regional and remote Australia, connecting people to family, community, and the services they need to maintain and improve their standard of living. Australian aviation grew from the necessity of servicing remote and regional Australia by air, and this remains critical today. (8

In a country the size of Australia, aviation services provide access for millions of Australians and international visitors to explore and connect with regional communities. In addition to connecting people for leisure and family purposes, aviation supports visitors travelling to regions for business and education. Likewise, aviation access for Australians in regional areas to travel to cities is important for personal and business purposes. (8a)

Our regions play a pivotal role in our State's economy, and most agricultural and resource products come from outside Adelaide. Ensuring our products are connected to key domestic and global export gateways – such as ports and airports – is essential for the ongoing success of these industries and our regional economies. (20

Regional airlines are facing headwinds — and not just the meteorological kind. Aging fleets, limited investment, and structural market challenges are forcing many regional operators to reduce schedules. (12

Regional air services face substantial capital investment in the purchase of aircraft, high ongoing aircraft operational and maintenance costs and airport charges. These costs are recovered over a relatively small market with variable passenger loadings. The outcome results in high risk for the service providers and high costs for the user.

The vast majority of regional airports are now owned by local councils, many of which struggle to finance their ongoing maintenance and development. Typically, smaller airports with fewer passengers per annum are less likely to be self-sufficient or profitable. Assistance for regional airports has traditionally been provided by state and territory governments, with many operating grants schemes to finance upgrade works. (8b) These Councils, while capable of performing the day-to-day maintenance and operational responsibilities of the airport, do not generally have the expertise to undertake development, safety matters and major maintenance or the financial resources.

For our major country towns, connectivity with Adelaide is extremely important. As has been demonstrated earlier, both the distance, duration of the trip and the cost make the road journey for many an undesirable option. For residents in Port Augusta and Renmark, there are no other alternatives to road travel. However, in towns with regular scheduled air services, the residents are confronted with a one-way airfare to Adelaide that costs between 301% to 151% of an airfare to Melbourne and road costs from 333% to 81% of an airfare to Melbourne (this cost includes Value of Time).

The 2026/27 budget indicates the State Government will spend $307 per metropolitan person on public transport and a meagre $72.00 per regional person per annum.

As the country regions are substantial economic drivers of the State, we must do better. We must provide greater assistance to the country regions. The pressure on the country regions and regional air services demands a change of thinking.

Regular scheduled air services to meet demand must continue to Adelaide from Port Lincoln, Ceduna, Whyalla, Coober Pedy, Mount Gambier and Kingscote. New routes should be established to Port Augusta, Port Pirie, and Renmark. This would result in the vast majority of country regional residents of South Australia being within two hours' travel time of Adelaide**.**

4.2 A New Approach

4.2.1 The Regional Airfares

The Government substantially subsidises the Adelaide metropolitan public transport system. This results in an annual subsidy of $307.00 per metropolitan person. Through the fare box, between 20 and 25 per cent of the operating costs are recovered. As the Country Regions play a vital role in South Australia's economy, it is reasonable that the Government subsidises regional travel to at least the same extent as Adelaide's public transport.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA REGIONAL POPULATION, TRAVEL DISTANCE & TIME AND THE COST OF TRAVEL AT JULY 2026

Region		Cost of Travel		PROPOSED SUBSIDISED AIRFARE based upon 25% cost recovery
Town	Population	Bus fare plus VOT as % of Melbourne Airfares	Regional Air fares as % of Melbourne Airfares	Regional Airfares as % of Melbourne Airfares
Port Lincoln	15,065	209%	167%	42%
Whyalla	21,720	122%	152%	39%
Ceduna	3,757	247%	286%	71%
Coober Pedy	1,526	333%	302%	97%
Port Augusta	14,469	105%		46%
Port Pirie	17664	81%		40%
Renmark	10,274	93%		42%
Mount Gambier	28,057	144%	223%	50%
Kingscote (Kangaroo Island)	5,212	97%	151%	31%

SOURCE: Population ABS Regional Population 2024-25
Distance information from Google Maps and Airlines.
The Cost of Travel has been derived from Intrastate Bus Companies, Qantas and Rex Airlines. Cost Comparison with Virgin, based on booking in July 2026 a month in advance. Virgin chosen as it was the mid-priced airline.
VOT:Value of time 40% of the Average Full Adult Wage ABS6302.0 escalated to June 2026 equals $20.80 per hour

The Contract Model for outsourcing metropolitan Adelaide bus services to the private sector provides the South Australian Government with a model that could be adopted in the Regional Air Sector. Adoption of this model would enable the Government, through subsidisation, to determine appropriate airfares. This is attractive as airfares that are within reach for country regional residents will mean that most will be within two hours' travel time to Adelaide.

This would ensure competitive tendering by service providers and would lower their risks.

Assuming the current one-way airfare from Adelaide to Port Lincoln is commercially viable. It has been used as a basis to construct airfares for all the other regional towns. Applying a subsidy that recovers 25% of total costs, the airfares would then become attractive to residents, businesses, and tourists,

All the other towns would have substantially lower airfares. For example, with reference to an airfare from Adelaide to Port Lincoln, the subsidised airfares would result in a reduction from 167% to 42% of the cost of an airfare to Melbourne. Please refer to the adjoining table for comparisons of other regional towns.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA REGIONAL POPULATION, TRAVEL DISTANCE & TIME AND THE COST OF TRAVEL AT JULY 2026

Region		Cost of Travel		PROPOSED SUBSIDISED AIRFARE based upon 25% cost recovery
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The subsidised airfares would become an economic driver for the country regions. These airfares would be a platform for future development.

As a result of the improved connectivity, new residents, new businesses and increased tourism could be attracted to the country regions. Public servants and other service providers may overcome their previous reluctance to move to regional towns. The country regions will become vibrant parts of South Australia.

4.2.2 The Regional Airports

The vast majority of regional airports are now owned by local councils, many of which struggle to finance their ongoing maintenance and development. Typically, smaller airports with fewer passengers per annum are less likely to be self-sufficient or profitable. Assistance for regional airports has traditionally been provided by state and territory governments, with many operating grants schemes to finance upgrade works. [8b]

Short runways limit the types of aircraft that can use these regional airports. Each airport has a runway between 1428 metres and 1815 metres.

The Regional Councils, while capable of performing the day-to-day maintenance and operational responsibilities of the airport, do not generally have the expertise to undertake major development, major maintenance or upgrades to runways, safety, and terminals or the financial resources.

Therefore, the State and Federal Governments should fund the development, safety, and maintenance costs of regional airports. With Councils being responsible for undertaking the day-to-day operations of the airport

4.2.3 An Estimate of the Required Government Subsidy

An estimate of the cost of the required 75% Government airfare subsidy has been prepared based upon the 2024 number of seats provided by the airlines to Port Lincoln, Whyalla, Ceduna, Coober Pedy, Mount Gambier and Kingscote (Kangaroo Island), while Port Augusta is based upon 2019 figures. It has been assumed that the number of flights to Port Pirie and Renmark would be the same as Port Augusta flights to Port Augusta.

It is estimated that the Government subsidy for the 2024 level of existing scheduled flights to regional towns plus new flights to Port Augusta, Port Pirie and Renmark would be $90 million dollars per annum. This would amount to an annual subsidy of $295 per country regional person. It is misleading to compare this to the subsidy of $307 per person for Adelaide metropolitan public transport, as the regional flights not only serve the residents but also businesses, service providers and tourists.

5.0 CONCLUSION

For the growth and development of South Australia, it is obvious and clear-cut that the South Australian Government should, in cooperation with the Federal Government, implement the following,

A. **Fund intrastate air services using Adelaide's public transport bus contract model. Fares for intrastate air travel would be based on the recovery of 25% of the full costs.**

B. **Provide regular scheduled intrastate air services to meet demand on the following routes.**

ix. Adelaide - Port Lincoln
x. Adelaide - Ceduna
xi. Adelaide - Whyalla
xii. Adelaide - Coober Pedy
xiii. Adelaide - Port Augusta/ Port Pirie
xiv. Adelaide - Renmark
xv. Adelaide - Mount Gambier
xvi. Adelaide – Kingscote

C. **Fund the Development, Safety, and Maintenance costs of regional airports. With the Councils responsible for undertaking the day-to-day operations of the airports.**

6.0 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author, Craig Parsonage, who has travelled extensively throughout South Australia over many years, has gained substantial knowledge and experience from senior employment in Transport. Because he is concerned about Regional Connectivity in South Australia, he has undertaken a comprehensive review of the current situation and, in writing this paper, has researched numerous documents**.** Only those documents referred to in this paper are acknowledged in the Biography.

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