

To:

Jessica Shaw MLA

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To the committee,

The high cost of airfares to and from the North West is an important issue which absolutely deserves your attention. I write this submission to share my experience and to highlight some of the effects this cost has had on my town.

My situation

I grew up in Perth and started working in the Kimberley in 2012. I was fortunate enough to have had a mining job, which flew me from Perth to Argyle Diamond Mine, just outside of Kununurra, so I did not have to pay the exuberant price to get here. After 3 years of working there, I had applied for a job in town as I had fallen in love with the place and people whilst visiting.

However, it is my most recent experience which has really hammered this issue home. My grandmother, who spent a big portion of my life raising me, passed away on 26th June, in Perth. I needed to book a flight that day. The flight on Monday 26th was \$565 and the price the following day with the same carrier, Tuesday 27th, was \$800. I made the decision to travel that same day, left work, packed my bag and made it to the airport all in 2 hours, saving me \$235.

My return flight to Kununurra was also during school holidays and the pickings were slim, between the days sold out and the days Virgin do not fly Perth to Kununurra, it left me with two choices - Monday 3rd July, this Virgin flight was \$1980 and flew direct from Perth to Kununurra or Wednesday 5th July, this Airnorth flight was \$820, it had 3 stopovers, Perth to Alice Springs to Darwin to Kununurra and departed at 12pm. I touched down in Kununurra at 8.30pm that night.

My travel experiences

During my time in Kununurra, I have flown overseas once, and to Perth approximately 2 x a year. I have also booked many flights for my family to visit me and my beautiful surroundings.

Kununurra's closest 'centres' are Broome, Darwin and Perth. Below is the one way cost of flying to those places (which is Kununurra residents' portals for flying overseas, or to the east coast.

these figures are based on my own observations while living in Kununurra

Perth-Kununurra (one way) (3,211km) (3 hour flight)

\$250 on sale, \$370 average, and \$800-1300 at peak (this high end of the scale is not uncommon)

Darwin-Kununurra (one way) (827km) (50 minute flight)

\$200 on sale, \$250-300 average, and \$500-600 at peak

Broome-Kununurra (one way) (1043km) (1 hour flight)

\$200 on sale, \$250-300 average, and \$500-600 at peak

It is incredibly expensive to leave or visit Kununurra. As a resident, I was far less inclined to travel anywhere which wasn't within driving distance – an 827km trip to Darwin isn't uncommon.

During my time in Kununurra, I regularly avoided travelling because of the high cost. I was not making a large wage, and already battling the high cost of living in the region – food, fuel and rent is all considerably more expensive than other parts of WA.

Sure, there are airline sales, and I have once nabbed my parents a \$450 return trip to Kununurra (yes, that's the ground breaking sale price!) but this usually means flights must be booked 8-9 months in advance.

What are the implications?

Kununurra is a strong centre for tourism, agriculture, resources and business. The high cost of airfares is stifling the economy, limiting the town's growth potential, and deterring people from moving to the region. It is also having a large-scale, negative effect on current residents.

Social cost

It is disappointing and depressing to be unable to visit friends and family, or take a holiday, because of the cost. While living in Kununurra, I found myself isolated from Perth friends and family, unable to attend special events including birthdays and weddings. Everyone in the region faces this choice, and many choose to pack up and leave instead of forking out thousands. It is not uncommon to hear of a family of four paying \$6000 to visit the east coast.

Economic cost

I believe I am just one of hundreds of people that dearly love the Kimberley, but have (or will) eventually leave the region, chasing better economic prospects and a lower

cost of living elsewhere in WA. Many people see Kununurra as a short term place to live due to its high cost (including airfares) and its remote location. As I approach my mid 30s and start to consider where I might like to buy property and raise a family, Kununurra was a very expensive option. The Kimberley is losing so many high-quality professionals, community members and volunteers because it simply costs so much to live in the region. This absolutely includes the high cost of flying in and out of the region.

In addition, businesses are suffering. Tourism is vastly impacted by this cost and the Kimberley is simply unable to capture short-stay visitors and low-budget or young travellers. Why would a tourist pay \$550-1100 to fly to Kununurra for the weekend, when they could fly to Bali for \$129?

Why do flights cost so much?

Part of the problem airlines face is airport landing fees. In April 2016, the cost of landing a plane at Kununurra Airport was slashed after a campaign by the town's four local aviation companies.

The groups submitted a proposal to the Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley to show the high cost of landing in Kununurra as compared to other airports. Figures showed that of all Australian airports a plane might land at, Kununurra was the most expensive municipally-owned airport, bar seven remote Aboriginal communities in the Top End, eclipsing airports at other remote communities, towns and cities. Charges at Kununurra had increased 45 per cent in three years, from \$20 a tonne in 2013 to \$29 per tonne in 2016.

The Shire opted to return the charge to \$20 a tonne; however the cost of flights did not change. Before the cut, charges were 56 per cent higher than Broome, 95 per cent higher than Derby, and up to 147 per cent higher than some other local government airports in Australia.

Other issues raised include a lack of competition leading to 'price gouging' residents.

I also understand airlines have raised concern about being unable to fill seats, but it poses the question that surely if the seats were cheaper, more people would fly?

Conclusion

The phrase "the Kimberley would be a much better place to live if it was a bit easier to get out" is repeated almost more than "it's hot", which, if you've been to the region, is a lot.

I write this submission someone who holds the Kimberley very close to my heart and wants to see the region (and its residents) prosper. I would love to be able to return home more often.

Thank you for holding this inquiry and I sincerely hope something comes out of it.

I would absolutely welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

Thank you,

Joanne Pavlinovich
