



**Submission:
Economics and Industry Standing
Committee Inquiry into Regional
Airfares**

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1 Inquiry Terms of Reference

The following submission is to:

The Economics and Industry Standing Committee which has resolved to inquire into and report on matters relating to airfare prices on regular public transport (RPT) air routes in regional Western Australia.

In particular, the Committee will evaluate the:

- a. factors contributing to the current high cost of regional airfares;
- b. impacts that high-cost regional airfares have on regional centres- from a business, tourism and social perspective;
- c. impact of State Government regulatory processes on the cost and efficiency of regional air services;
- d. actions that the State and local government authorities can take to limit increases to airfares without undermining the commercial viability of RPT services;
- e. actions that airlines can take to limit increases to airfares without undermining the commercial viability of RPT services; and
- f. recent actions taken by other Australian governments to limit regional RPT airfare increases.

The Committee will report to the House by 28 November 2017.

This submission:

- Is from the Onslow Chamber of Commerce and Industry Incorporated. Commercial Unit 2, 20 Second Avenue, Onslow WA 6710 ABN: 97 848 587 101
- Is in response to items a, b, c and e - as above

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2 Executive Summary

Although there is currently an air service to and from Onslow available to the general public, access, affordability and frequency is not guaranteed. These Regular Passenger Transport (RPT) seats (that have been generously quarantined by industry on industry chartered flights), are subject to the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow and – in accordance with current allocations – inadequate for projected population growth.

For the business community – reliant upon air transport for mobilisation of a workforce, attracting tourists, and retaining staff - a regular and consistent flight service (cost, frequency and availability) is essential. Considering the lack of guarantee associated with the existing arrangements, the Onslow Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) believes the subject of air transport to and from Onslow is worthy of consideration by the Economics and Industry Standing Committee through this submission.

Onslow is located on the coast within the Shire of Ashburton in the Pilbara region of Western Australia - 1386 kms north of Perth, 360 kms south of Karratha and 401 kms by road from Exmouth. The township is 80km west off the North West Coastal Highway and accessible by car, a twice weekly bus service (to the turn off only) and air.

Due to the geographic isolation of Onslow and the limited options available in terms of access, air transport is vital. For the Onslow community, air transport is often the preferred and only travel option available whether it be for business purposes (meetings, mobilisation of staff, sourcing expert advisors, professional development and training), recreational purposes (holidays, keeping in contact with family), personal reasons (attending funerals and weddings) or accessing medical services.

In a survey conducted by the OCCI in 2014, (prior to availability of the current Onslow air service) health, safety and economics were significant considerations in favour of an air service directly from and to Onslow. Of the 32 respondents, 31 (97%) indicated that a direct Onslow service (in contrast to flights from Karratha or Exmouth) would present costs savings (fuel, parking, vehicle wear and tear, motel accommodation, time away from work) whilst 94% of respondents identified significant health and safety benefits (not driving long distances, avoiding fatigue, avoiding traffic).

Flights to and from Onslow are now available each day of the week to the general public through allocated RPT seats on flights chartered by Chevron and BHP. The number of seats allocated varies from 5 to 12 on the Wheatstone chartered flights with up to 80 available on the BHP chartered flight (Tuesdays).

Bookings are available through the Virgin online service or through a local travel agent at a capped cost of \$299 each way.

Although the OCCI is grateful for the current access to RPT seats, the concern (in terms of long term social and economic resilience) is the uncertainty associated with accessing flights and the reliance on the generosity (and capacity) of the resource sector to quarantine seats. This concern is exacerbated by the imminent transition by Wheatstone from construction to operations – which will impact significantly on the number of flights and the consequent number of RPT seats available to the general public.

Without a guarantee of seats being available on a regular and consistent basis at an affordable price, conducting business, diversifying the economy post construction (in particular tourism), mobilising, attracting and retaining a workforce will make it extremely hard to conduct business in Onslow.

For the OCCI membership (in excess of 130), it is of paramount importance that there is access to a regular, consistent, affordable and reliable RPT in Onslow.

Accordingly, the OCCI recommends that:

1. The State Government facilitates the establishment of a guaranteed, affordable and regular air service, available to the general public, to and from Onslow by:
 - a) Offering subsidies (commensurate with subsidies provided to metropolitan areas in relation to public transport) to operators and/or industry to maintain an acceptable level of flight frequency, access and affordability based on demand (associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow).
 - b) Gaining an agreement from industry to maintain an acceptable level of flight frequency, access and affordability based on demand associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow.
 - c) Regulating the system¹ as they have done for other routes with insufficient passenger demand such as Aviair airline offering a service from Kununnara to Halls Creek; Skippers Aviation from Perth to Meekathara to Mt Magnet to Wiluna and Regional Express from Perth to Albany.
2. The State Government collaborates with representative local governments in the Pilbara and surrounding regions to establish and subsidise a regular RPT service between major towns.
3. The State Government collaborates with the Shire of Ashburton to establish a system providing discounts to RPT for businesses that can demonstrate a commitment to local content in order to stimulate tourism and reduce the considerable overheads (not applicable to Perth based companies) associated with workforce mobilisation.
4. RPT operators offer tourism packages, minimal in-flight hospitality and an adequate amount of flights to and from Onslow and Pilbara towns to increase affordability.

3 Background

3.1 Onslow Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI)

The OCCI was incorporated in May 2004 under the Associations Incorporation Act 1987 and has a membership in excess of 130. As a locally based organisation with a significant presence in the Onslow community the OCCI is instrumental in relation to the creation of local employment; encouraging and promoting investment in the development of the town through access to affordable goods, services, accommodation and utilities; representing the community with regard to future development and lobbying on behalf of business and industry with regard to issues and opportunities that may impact business development and growth.

A focus for the OCCI over the past three years has been on the promotion of local content (Buy Local), introduction of a competitive labour margin (to offset the labour hire costs associated with a locally based and operating business including accommodation, meals, **air transport**, Personal

¹ The OCCI stresses that regulating the system would be an option only if a dedicated RPT could offer and maintain an acceptable level of flight frequency, access and affordability based on demand associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow.

Protective Equipment and associated administrative costs. These inputs are typically provided to external contractors by key industry bodies. Subsequently, external contractor's costs are significantly less than local contractors) and access to affordable and reliable air transport.

3.2 Onslow

Onslow is located on the coast within the Shire of Ashburton in the Pilbara region of Western Australia - 1386 kms north of Perth, 360 kms south of Karratha and 401 kms by road from Exmouth. The township is 80km west off the North West Coastal Highway. It is ideally located to service offshore locations including the Mackerel and Montebello Islands, Barrow Island (Gorgon LNG Plant), Exmouth Gulf, and the Carnarvon Basin (oil and gas reserves) as well as in-land mines including Rio Tinto's Mesa A and Mesa J sites and the potential West Pilbara Iron Ore Project sites including Red Hill and Mt Stuart Stations, located 35-85km south west of Pannawonica

In addition to the US\$ 34 billion Chevron-operated Wheatstone Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) and BHP Billiton's \$US 1.5 billion Macedon Domestic Gas Projects, Onslow continues to grow with a number of developments having come on train or ramped up. Construction of the Onslow Marine Support Base (OMSB), the recent announcement to build WA's largest gas storage facility at the cost of \$69 million by the owner of the Dampier to Bunbury Natural Gas Pipeline (DBNGP), interest from K+S Salt to establish a salt works in the area and the Department of Transport's planned 12 pen Marina demonstrate the extent of this growth.

The population of Onslow in 2016 was 857 (ABS 2016). This figure does not include the Fly in Fly out (FIFO) population at Ashburton North SIA – which has the capacity to accommodate in excess of 8,000 personnel.

Based on the number of projects currently operating or in train however, projections are that the population of Onslow will stabilize at around 950 to 1,000 in the medium term.

The current population consists of 195 families with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people making up 21.1% of the population.

3.3 Onslow Airport

The redeveloped Onslow Airport was officially opened in August 2015 and is located 3.7kms from the Onslow town centre and 26kms from Ashburton North SIA. The as new 1900m runway can support a high grade of aircraft (Category C) including the Fokker 100 passenger jet and 717's however, the terminal facilities have been designed to comfortably service 100 passengers.

The redevelopment included a new taxi way, an aircraft parking apron, new and upgraded runway and apron lighting, new radio and navigational aids, refuelling and fire-fighting facilities, fencing (to CASA requirements) and the establishment of a new terminal and briefing room.

The terminal is equipped with screening to support RPT services (to CASA requirements). Flights are available each day of the week to the general public through allocated RPT seats on flights chartered by Chevron and BHP. The number of seats allocated varies from 5 to 12 on the Wheatstone chartered flights with up to 80 available on the BHP chartered flight (Tuesdays).

Bookings are available through Virgin online service or through a local travel agent at a capped cost of \$299 each way.

The airport has the capacity to turn around one flight comfortably every hour, however could support two flights per hour if required

The \$49 million project was funded by \$30 million from the Chevron-operated Wheatstone Project Australia, \$13 million from the Onslow Community Development fund (a joint Royalties for Regions and Wheatstone Project fund) and \$6 million from the Shire of Ashburton.

4 OCCI response to the TOR (a, b, c and e)

4.1 Factors contributing to the current high cost of regional airfares.

Position:

Factors that contribute to the high costs of regional airfares **typically** include *low passenger demand from the general public* and *fees and charges* associated with operating an air service.

The situation in Onslow is however not **typical**. Flights to and from Onslow are chartered by industry who generously quarantine a number of RPT seats² on nominated flights. Consequently, the number of passengers is not a factor for the operator in terms of profitability and the cost of fees and charges are (more than likely) included in the cost of the charter.

In the opinion of the OCCI, the cost of fares for the Onslow general public should be highly affordable. Considering industry is currently offering seats on their charter flights, further subsidies - to truly stimulate economic growth in Onslow - could be offered by the State Government.

Industry needs combined with business (local and remote) demand for workforce mobilisation, delivery of government and other essential services and general public usage will always make air transport to and from Onslow viable. A guarantee as to how this air transport is delivered however is a necessity.

Impact and evidence:

During recent discussions with OCCI members, it was indicated that a number of local business groups were reliant upon air transport to mobilise short term contract workers, attend essential business meetings in Perth and to transport experts, clients and consultants to and from Onslow.

Feedback from the 2014 OCCI Access to Air Travel Survey found that the key use for air travel from the 32 respondents was for transporting staff (business and or holiday - 69%). Personal reasons (59%), for business networking (47%) and for transporting consultants (41%) all rated highly. Transporting a FIFO workforce was identified by 11 (34%) of the respondents.

One respondent also highlighted the critical importance of tourism to the Onslow community stating that: *We believe that air transport is vital to the future of tourism to the town and surrounding area.*

² The number of seats allocated varies from 5 to 12 on the Wheatstone chartered flights with up to 80 available on the BHP chartered flight (Tuesdays). Flights are currently available 7 days a week.

Don't forget about tourism. If we are able to secure a handful of seats a minimum 2 days per week, we would increase tourist numbers dramatically. Demand is there already. Senior management and local managers would utilise the service more than once per month. Critical item is price and guaranteed seats.

For the OCCI therefore, the issue associated with accessing RPT seats is not only affordability, it is the lack of guarantee of seats being available, often enough and for the long term. The current RPT seating allocation is not meeting general public and business demand which also needs to be addressed.

Without this certainty and the current reliance on the good will of industry, there are significant risks for the business and general community associated with accessing air travel. The most significant risk is that industry may reduce the number of flights available based on the phase of their project (feasibility, approval, construction, operations, maintenance, expansion) or the state of the economy (demand for product, global trends). If this occurs:

- Businesses will be further compromised in terms of mobilising a short-term contract workforce or retaining residential workers and their families (impact of isolation)
- Tourism operators will face additional barriers by not being able to guarantee flights that can be booked well in advance. A regular and long-term air timetable at set costs is critical
- The general public will not be able to access medical and other government services as needed. Currently through the Royalties for Region funded Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS), Onslow residents are able to receive flights for medical appointments but unfortunately if the flights are not available this is not actually possible.

In terms of equity, the State Government needs to intervene as they have in the metropolitan areas (through subsidised public transport) and in other remote locations (through regulation of air routes which have insufficient passenger demand to support airline competition³) to ensure affordability and reliability.

With regard to *airport fees and charges*, the OCCI acknowledges that the cost to operate an airport in the remote Pilbara region is significant and that this responsibility poses a significant financial impost upon the Shire of Ashburton.

The air service is however essential. In contrast to urban centres where public transport is available and affordable – due primarily to significant subsidies from the State Government – public transport to and from Onslow is non-existent. Therefore the OCCI believes it would be equitable for the State Government to provide a public transport subsidy to the Onslow community by supporting fee, charge and fare reductions associated with the Onslow airport.

Recommendations:

1. The State Government facilitates the establishment of a guaranteed, affordable and regular air service, available to the general public, to and from Onslow by:
 - a) Offering subsidies (commensurate with subsidies provided to metropolitan areas in relation to public transport) to operators and/or industry to maintain an acceptable level of flight

³ Flights can be regulated by the State Government by granting monopoly rights to a single airline to operate on a particular RPT route – as is the case with Aviair airline offering a service from Kununurra to Halls Creek; Skippers Aviation from Perth to Meekatharra to Mt Magnet to Wiluna and Regional Express from Perth to Albany: http://www.transport.wa.gov.au/mediaFiles/aviation/AV_P_RevRegRPTAirRoutesWAFinalRpt2015.pdf

frequency, access and affordability based on demand (associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow).

- b) Gaining an agreement from industry to maintain an acceptable level of flight frequency, access and affordability based on demand associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow.
- c) Regulating the system⁴ as they have done for other routes with insufficient passenger demand such as Aviair airline offering a service from Kununnara to Halls Creek; Skippers Aviation from Perth to Meekathara to Mt Magnet to Wiluna and Regional Express from Perth to Albany.

4.2 Impacts that high-cost regional airfares have on regional centres- from a business, tourism and social perspective

OCCI position:

Access to flights to and from Perth to Onslow are limited in number (allocated seats on chartered flights) and expensive compared to other haulage flights within and beyond Australia (a return airfare Perth to Melbourne on Qantas can be purchased for \$524 compared to \$600 Perth to Onslow on Virgin).

Access to and from Onslow other than by air is via road from Perth (1386 kms), road from Karratha airport (360 kms one way) or road from Exmouth airport (401 kms by road). The only other option is the Integrity operated bus service from Perth to the Onslow turn off (80 kms out of town – in the middle of no-where) which departs Perth on Tuesdays and Thursdays at a cost of \$256 per adult. Passengers are dropped off at 7.30pm (at the turn off) and are reliant on a private pre-arranged pick up or taxi.

These inequitable high costs and lack of transport options have a significant impact on the capacity of businesses and the community in Onslow to conduct business, access services and training, diversify into other business areas (e.g. tourism) and remain connected with family and friends beyond the isolation of Onslow.

For Onslow to continue to thrive, diversify and contribute to the Western Australian economy as it currently does, it is essential to maintain and grow a residential population and support local business through affordable, reliable and safe transport options.

Impact:

The high costs of flights to and from Onslow and lack of other transport options have the following impacts on business and the community in general:

- Local business having to travel to Perth for business incur additional expenses that are difficult to off-set. Not being present in Perth for meetings and networking can reduce the opportunity of securing work and contracts. This can often provide a negative incentive for businesses to base their premises and workforce in Onslow – which in turn impacts on the social and economic fabric of the community.

⁴ The OCCI stresses that regulating the system would be an option only if a dedicated RPT could maintain an acceptable level of flight frequency, access and affordability based on demand associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow.

- Due to the limited number of seats available and the high cost associated with the current flights, it is difficult to tender for short term contracts. In situations where additional workers or skilled workers are required to complement the existing workforce at short notice, local businesses often find it impossible to access seats on flights. These contracts will generally be awarded to large contracting groups based in Perth who are supplied air transport by the resource industry on the charter flights (at no cost). This is a significant advantage for Perth based tenderers in terms of availability of seats and costs.
- Residents of Onslow are geographically isolated and often live considerable distances from family and friends. From a social (weddings, family events, holidays) and personal perspective (funerals, weddings, births, job interviews, medical), having to fly to Perth is a considerable expense that urban based residents are not subject to.
- Due to the geographic isolation, local business finds it hard to retain a local workforce. Being able to access Perth for short breaks is dependent upon cost and flight availability. Transporting a family of five – at the current cost of \$598 return – is a significant outlay (almost \$3,000) for a family – especially for a weekend break.
- The comparative high cost of airfares is a huge disincentive to tourists (interstate, international and intrastate). Rather than visiting the Mackerel Islands, financially it is cheaper to visit Bali and or Melbourne. Post the construction phase of current industry activities, it is essential that the Onslow business economy expands – and considering the attractions available to Onslow – tourism is an obvious field to develop.
- For local business, government services and the general public it is expensive to access professional development and training – typically available in Perth. This expense is not limited to airfares, but if flights and or seats are limited – it can result in additional time away from work as well as accommodation and meal expenses.
- Opportunities relating to tourism, business opportunities and networking are being missed due to the lack of intra-regional transport options which could be addressed through the introduction of a RPT linking Pilbara towns. The OCCI in their 2016 Visitor and Business Stimulation Strategy identified a range of options to stimulate business and community growth including industrial, eco and Indigenous tourism, marketing of Onslow as a conference and training location, utilisation of the Beadon Creek Marina development and establishment of the Pilbara Tourism Association – to focus the spotlight on the Pilbara. Each of these strategies would be further enhanced through access to affordable RPT.

Evidence:

Flights to and from Onslow accessing the allocated RPT seats on industry chartered flights are comparatively expensive and often limiting for local business and the general public.

Current flights to and from Onslow through Virgin are capped at \$299 to complete the 1150km one-way flight (\$598 return) – which takes 2 hours. These flights currently offer limited hospitality or additional passenger comforts. Flights from Perth to Melbourne can be accessed for \$524 – a distance of 2,730 kms one way and takes up to 4 hours on the return leg. Flights from Perth to Bali on Air Asia take 3.45 hours one way and can be accessed for \$350 return.

Considering the affordability of flights to and from Perth to either Melbourne or Bali, a return fare of \$600 to Onslow provides little incentive to tourists to fly to Onslow; creates a significant overhead for businesses trying to mobilise a workforce and conduct business; exacerbates the sense of isolation for residents who can't afford to fly and creates considerable angst for those people

needing to access medical and other social service not available in Onslow (especially the Aboriginal community which makes up 21% of the population).

Availability of current flights is often at a premium. The current seats that are quarantined on the charter flights are typically unavailable short term. Currently a number of businesses operating in Onslow rely on RPT seats to maintain continuity of service. Although local businesses are committed to local content and a local workforce, short term contracts depend on a FIFO service to complement the existing work force.

To be able to be competitive and deliver, it is essential to have access to a dedicated and affordable RPT service to and from Onslow and the major towns in the Pilbara.

Recommendations:

1. The State Government collaborates with representative local governments in the Pilbara and surrounding regions to establish and subsidise a regular RPT service between major towns.
2. The State Government collaborates with the Shire of Ashburton to establish a system providing discounts to RPT for businesses that can demonstrate a commitment to local content⁵ in order to stimulate tourism and reduce the considerable overheads (not applicable to Perth based companies) associated with workforce mobilisation.

4.3 Impact of State Government regulatory processes on the cost and efficiency of regional air services

OCCI Position:

As noted in 4.1 and 4.2, Onslow is unique in terms of how RPT is accessed from and to Onslow and that no guaranteed air service is currently available.

In terms of the impact of State Government regulatory processes, the OCCI reiterates recommendations 1 and 2 as outlined in section 4.1.

With regard to the introduction of an intra-regional RPT, under the *Western Australian Transport Coordination Act 1966* and the *Transport Coordination Regulations 1985* the Minister for Transport has the authority to issue aircraft licences for up to 12 months, free of charge, to airlines operating within the State for commercial purposes (hire or reward), other than for medical emergency purposes (<http://www.transport.wa.gov.au/aviation/air-services.asp>).

This could be a consideration with regard to a trial of the intra-regional service

⁵ The OCCI position is that to be considered 'Local Content' a business would need to demonstrate its commitment to Onslow via reference to the following criteria:

- Direct investment to set-up or operate a business from Onslow for the provision of products and services
- Physical presence in Onslow (as opposed to the ANSIA) which may include permanent, FIFO or DIDO services
- Preparations for future business activity which highlight a long-term commitment to Onslow
- A 'Principal place of business' address or a 'registered address' in Onslow

4.4 Actions that airlines can take to limit increases to airfares without undermining the commercial viability of RPT services

OCCI Position:

One of the key strategies identified by the OCCI in terms of diversifying and growing the Onslow economy is tourism. Through the Onslow Visitor and Business Stimulation Strategy, the OCCI identified a range of options and opportunities for increasing the level of tourism and visitor numbers to the town which would lead to sustainability for the local hospitality and retail businesses in Onslow – especially post construction.

Accordingly, the OCCI believes that airlines could work with local hospitality and tourism providers and Aboriginal Trusts to consider packages that would attract and promote tourism to and from Onslow and the Pilbara region (through intra-regional RPT links).

The OCCI would also support airlines to cut costs by limiting in flight hospitality and providing a service that maintained an acceptable level of flight frequency, access and affordability based on demand associated with the peaks and troughs of the economic growth of Onslow.

Impact and evidence:

Affordable and connected airfares to Onslow and across the Pilbara region along with tourism packages would significantly increase the number of visitor numbers to the town and the rest of the Pilbara.

As identified in the Visitor and Business Stimulation Strategy, Onslow is ideally positioned to attract and satisfy a broad cross section of visitors including tourists (local, interstate, intra state and national), businesses, service providers and family members considering that:

- On average 73,000 visitors came to the Shire of Ashburton each year from 2008 to 2010 (Shire of Ashburton Tourism Strategy 2011)
- Onslow has extensive and affordable accommodation options available including 489 rooms, 137 caravan sites and 36 long term options
- Onslow has attractive and accessible tourist attractions including Indigenous (Station Stays), industrial (ANSIA, Wheatstone) and eco, nature (Termite mounds, sunsets, fishing, diving, islands, walking, beaches) based options
- Onslow has state of the art conference and retreat facilities along with family friendly accommodations and activities – ideal for Pilbara based groups and people
- Tourism trends are moving from long trips to short breaks, regional tourism is on the increase, new destinations are increasingly popular and nature based tourism is in vogue (Shire of Ashburton Tourism Strategy 2011)

An affordable and intra-regional RPT service would stimulate tourism, contribute to the appeal of Onslow as a place to visit and conduct business and create demand for Onslow goods and services.

In terms of reducing the cost of airfares, small measures are readily available. For example, the current charter operator into Onslow recently reduced their in-flight hospitality. Anecdotal feedback suggested that since this occurred, trade at the airport based café has increased significantly. From the perspective of the OCCI, this is good for local business and leads to savings for the flight operator which could then be passed onto the passengers.

With regard to the minimal number of flights that would be considered adequate for Onslow businesses and residents, this would be dependent on the level of economic activity in the town and region.

Onslow is and will continue to experience significant peaks and troughs in terms of demand for air travel based on the level of industry development and growth. As outlined in the OCCI Business Investment Guide, there is still significant opportunity for further growth in Onslow. In addition to the US\$ 34 billion Chevron-operated Wheatstone LNG, BHP Billiton's \$US 1.5 billion Macedon Domestic Gas Projects and the current construction of the OMSB, the recent announcement to build WA's largest gas storage facility by the DBNGP, interest from K&S Salt to establish a salt works in the area and the Department of Transport's planned 12 pen Marina demonstrate the extent of this growth.

Recommendations:

1. RPT providers offer tourism packages, minimal in-flight hospitality and an adequate amount of flights to and from Onslow and Pilbara towns.