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Step 2: Contact details

First name

Rob

Last name

██████

Organisation (if applicable)

RAAA

State

ACT

Email address

[REDACTED]

Phone number

[REDACTED]

Email notification

aviationconsumer@infrastructure.gov.au

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OFFICIAL

Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development,
Communications, Sport, and the Arts (DITRDCA) into
Aviation Consumer Protections Consultation - October 2025



The Regional Aviation Association of Australia (RAAA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport, and the Arts (DITRDCA) consultation on the proposed Aviation Consumer Protections - primary legislation.

The RAAA acknowledges the Government's plan to establish an aviation consumer protection framework designed to improve outcomes for the travelling public by clarifying the rights of aviation customers consisting of two key elements:

- Minimum standards set out in the Aviation Consumer Protections Charter ('the Charter') enforceable by a regulator (the Aviation Consumer Protection Authority (ACPA) and,
- A consumer ombuds scheme to handle individual consumer complaints that can't be settled directly with the relevant airline or airport.

Aligned to the RAAA's input to previous consultations we firmly submit that remote and regional aviation operations should be exempted from some of the components of any such scheme. The inclusion of regional airlines and airports in all components of the proposed Charter would result in a reduction of service levels to consumers contrary to the program's stated objective of enhancing service levels.

The imposition of additional costs on regional airlines and airports that will be incurred through this framework raises a real possibility of adverse impacts for communities in regional and remote locations across Australia. Any new scheme should consider the type of airline operation and the locations they are operating to protect the vital services they provide to regional and remote communities across Australia.

Safety must also remain the industry's number one priority. Any Charter must not compromise the world-class safety culture of the Australian aviation industry. There is a real risk that safety could be undermined by factors that put pressure on an airline or airport operator to avoid a financial penalty as part of their day-to-day operational decision making.

There are many operational reasons why a scheduled flight can be delayed or cancelled and the RAAA believes that all aviation participants who are a part of, or have input into, the aviation network and its operations should be included in the proposed Aviation Consumer Protections Charter.

Specifically, Airservices Australia and their air traffic control services are a critical part of the safe and efficient function of the aviation network. They are a key influence on the ability for an airline to maintain safe, efficient, and on-time operations. Operational air traffic control decisions by Airservices at any of Australia's capital city airports flow through to all other regional airports and the airlines that provide services to and from those locations. Sydney airport is the hub of the entire Australian network. Any delay at Sydney regardless of the reason will impact other airports and airlines across Australia.

The proposed Charter details new functions and processes including an Aviation Consumer Protection Authority, an Aviation Consumer Ombudsperson, and an Aircraft Noise Ombudsperson all of which are to be funded by charging the aviation industry a new levy, or effectively a new tax. This will place an extra financial burden on all airlines and airports. Many smaller regional airlines and airports financial viability is already precarious, and any additional levy or tax is not supported by the RAAA in any way. If Government did introduce the new levy or tax, operators would have little choice but to pass this onto the fare paying passengers through higher ticket prices.

The RAAA encourages Government to provide more detail on how much the new levy or tax would be and why the cost could not be met by government through budget appropriation funding of its departments and aviation agencies.

Regional Aviation & The Proposed Aviation Consumer Protections Charter

The RAAA acknowledges that the issues around passenger consumer rights, and in particular flight delays and cancellations, can be highly emotive and frustrating for members of the travelling public who are directly affected. However, delays and cancellations are often the result of unavoidable safety issues and the problems which arise when servicing remote locations.

Additionally, aviation consumers have existing legal rights and protections under existing legislation enacted through the Competition and Consumer Act 2010 (Cth) and airlines and airports also have existing obligations for liability for loss or damage of baggage under the Montreal Convention 1999 and the Civil Aviation (Carriers' Liability) Act 1959 (CACL Act).

The RAAA acknowledges that the Charter is intended to ensure that aviation consumers are receiving appropriate treatment from airlines and airports in Australia. The Charter also draws attention to the need for airlines and airports to improve customer standards, make complaints processes accessible, ensure customer information is available and improve timely responses.

The rights within the Charter will inform the consumer ombuds scheme and the resolution process and any determination the ombudsperson may give to resolve a complaint in a particular way.

The RAAA notes that the Charter states that aviation customers have the right to:

1. Be treated with dignity and respect, in an accessible and inclusive environment
2. Accurate, timely and accessible information and customer service
3. Prompt and fair remedies and support during and after cancellations, delays, and disruptions
4. Safe and timely baggage handling and fair remedies for damage and delays
5. The protection of their personal information
6. Provide feedback, make complaints, and exercise their rights without retribution

The RAAA agrees with these high-level outcomes however caution needs to be applied to some of the specific details that will be covered in the detail of the Charter.

It is important to note that if the Charter is applied to all regional airlines and airports, it has the potential to impact regional and remote communities across Australia in adverse ways including increases in prices or reduction in services.

The RAAA submits that given the following factors, that operators who operate predominantly on regional routes be excluded from parts of the Charter because:

1. The operating conditions of airlines operating to remote and regional locations and regional airports are materially different to those of airlines operating between capital city airports. Many regional carriers operate aircraft into remote locations where there are no back up aircraft or crew available, and no engineering services available.
2. Many regional routes are serviced by a very limited flight schedule meaning passengers cannot easily be transferred to alternate flights to avoid delays. In these circumstances, regional carriers face a significantly higher burden in attempting to ensure flights are not delayed or cancelled, whilst also ensuring flights are operated safely.
3. The consequences of destabilising events are vastly magnified when they occur in regional and remote locations, with the result that there is less ability for operators to mitigate or avoid cancellations or delays in those locations in many instances.
4. Given the high costs associated with operating some regional routes, the lower or inconsistent demand on some routes and the size of businesses operating regional flights, regional carriers are more sensitive to any additional per passenger costs.
5. Regional carriers provide critical services and connectivity which should be fostered and supported by the Federal Government. The ongoing issues for Rex Airlines have highlighted the significant challenges of running a financially viable regional airline in Australia.
6. Regional carriers often have limited customer service staff and do not employ in house legal departments meaning the management of claims via the Charter would be disproportionately burdensome for smaller operators.
7. The failure of regional carriers can have a significant effect on the connectivity of regional locations within Australia. This can be seen with the recent administration of Rex. Although Rex continues to operate there is the potential for a substantial number of routes to be disconnected from Australia's aviation network if Rex ceases to operate.

There is a real risk that if costs are increased on some regional routes, including by imposing costs associated with flight cancellations or delays, that regional carriers will either stop servicing the routes or even cease to be able to operate at all.

Given the factors outlined above, and the importance of preserving and supporting the regional aviation industry in Australia, the RAAA submits that the Charter should not apply unilaterally to regional airlines and airports.

To exclude regional carriers will not deprive consumers who have purchased tickets for carriage on regional flights of a benefit. There is an existing regime under the Australian Consumer Law which will continue to apply, and which ensures consumers are adequately protected.

The RAAA has specific concerns with several of the proposed requirements. Many are impractical for a regional operator and would be difficult to deliver as they may place an administrative burden on the regional airline where they do not have the capacity, both staff and IT system, to be able to manage some of the requirements like refunds in the specified timeframe.

Key Factors Influencing Delays or Cancellations in Regional Aviation

There are numerous reasons for flight delays and flight cancellations by regional airlines in Australia. These can be stand-alone factors or, in some instances, a combination of factors that ultimately result in major flight delays or flight cancellations.

Weather

The safe carriage of a flight is very much dependent on the prevailing weather conditions at the departing aerodrome location, the flight route to be flown and at the destination aerodrome. Adverse weather outcomes are generally flight planned when possible, however the changeability of weather as a natural phenomenon cannot be fully predicted or accounted for. It is well recognised both internationally and in Australia that weather is one of the highest contributing factors to flight delays and flight cancellations.

Regional carriers, which tend to operate smaller aircraft into more remote airports, face an increased burden of responding to weather conditions than larger airlines which operate larger aircraft between capital cities.

Where weather conditions prevent safe operation of aircraft, flights cannot operate and need to be cancelled or delayed. This is entirely outside the control of the airline.

Air Traffic Control (Airservices Australia)

Airservices Australia (Airservices) is the Government owned organisation that solely provides air traffic control services across 11-percent of the world's airspace, including over mainland Australia.[1]

Airservices has implemented an active Ground Delay Program (GDP) at several major airports across Australia that seeks to better manage arrivals and departures at those airports. In short, the GDP effectively means airlines are given an exact time window when they can depart or arrive. This is actively managed daily via the airports' slot management (booking) system. So, while an airline may schedule a flight for a particular arrival or departure time ultimately this can be affected by factors like network congestion or weather events as described previously.

Enroute air traffic volumes and constrained airport traffic capacity can also require an airline to slow down in flight to delay the arrival time and better sequence the airline traffic into the arrival aerodrome.

Some regional airlines only operate one or two services a day or week into or out of a regional aerodrome or remote community. Appropriately they will be as flexible and accommodating with their passengers' needs as much as they possibly can, however many regional flights 'hub' through larger regional cities or major city airports and the regional airline can be impacted by the late arrival of passengers onboard other in-bound flights. When this occurs, it is outside the influence of our member airlines' operations as they can be very much constrained by the operations of another airline or airport capacity constraint.

Airservices has expressly recognised that regional aviation faces its own unique challenges and given the difficulties faced by airlines operating in these remote locations, the inclusion of regional airlines in the Charter would impose an unfair burden on those carriers by imposing liability on those carriers in circumstances where the operating conditions will sometimes make delays and cancellations unavoidable.

[1] <https://www.airservicesaustralia.com/>



Airport Infrastructure

There are many factors that relate directly to an aerodrome, its infrastructure and the daily operations that can contribute to flight delays. Some of these include.

- Planned runway and taxi-way maintenance works
- Unplanned runway pavement failures requiring immediate repair
- Aerobridge mechanical failures or other gate issues
- Foreign Object Debris (FOD) on runways and/or taxiways
- Airport security screening delays
- Baggage handling delays or equipment breakdowns
- Ground handling services provider delays/issues
- Booking systems/computer outages
- Fuel supply, refuelling delays, and distribution infrastructure issues

These issues are particularly relevant to regional carriers who operate to remote airports which usually have a single runway and limited other services.

Passenger Management Issues

- Passenger late check-ins and no shows
- Passengers fail to board
- Disruptive passengers
- Medical emergencies landside and airside
- Terminal issues with security/fire alarms evacuations



Conclusion

Regional aviation provides critical services in Australia. Many routes are serviced by small operators, operating small aircraft, in circumstances where the operator has a very limited ability to control flight cancellations or delays. Requiring regional operators who service these routes to be covered by Charter will be burdensome and has the potential to reduce the ability of operators to service particular routes.

The question of which airlines will be required to be covered by the Charter needs to be well considered in the context of the problem that it is trying to address. This includes looking very closely at other overseas jurisdictions and their experience in running such schemes and the potential for unintended consequences or unfavourable outcomes from such a scheme.

Safety must also remain the industry's number one priority. Any Charter must not threaten or compromise the world-class safety culture of the Australian aviation industry. There is a real risk that safety could be undermined by factors that put pressure on an operator to avoid a financial penalty as part of their day-to-day operational decision making.

The new Aviation Consumer Protection Authority, an Aviation Consumer Ombudsperson and an Aircraft Noise Ombudsperson are to be funded by charging the aviation industry a new levy or tax. This will place an extra financial burden on all airlines and airports. Many smaller regional airlines and airports financial viability already is precarious, and any additional levy or tax is not supported by the RAAA in any way. If Government did introduce the new levy or tax operators would have little choice but to pass this onto the fare paying passengers through higher ticket prices.

The imposition of any additional costs burdens on regional airlines raises is a real possibility of adverse impacts for communities in regional and remote locations across Australia. Any Charter should consider the type of airline operation and the locations they operate to protect the services provided to regional and remote communities across Australia. This should involve excluding certain airline operators or locations from the proposed scheme.

The RAAA submits that given all the factors above, any Aviation Consumer Protections Charter should not apply unilaterally to operators, and we firmly submit that regional aviation should be exempted from some of the components of any such scheme. Any Charter needs to focus only on specific issues that it is intended to address and not be a catch-all approach that then has a range of unintended consequences for regional aviation organisations and the communities that our members provide vital services to.





Specific Responses

The consultation questions relating to primary legislation.

1. Does the proposed regulation of airline services, airport services and airport accessibility services cover the core elements of the aviation consumer experience? Are there any missing elements?

Yes.

2. Are there any operational or technical considerations regarding international flights that would affect their regulation under the framework?

Airlines from the Pacific islands share some of the same operation challenges of Australian regional airlines in terms of the size of their organisations, the smaller number of aircraft they operate and the remote locations they operate from. Airlines from the Pacific islands would face many similar operational challenges as regional airlines in Australia.

3. Are there any operational or technical considerations regarding airport accessibility services that would affect their regulation under the framework?

The work currently being done by the Department addresses some of this in detail. Regional airlines and airports are quite unique both in terms of the types of aircraft flown and the location flown into and out of. The Department should reference these challenges as part of the Charter.

6. Is the role of the ACPA as proposed sufficient to protect aviation consumers and lift consumer standards, while not imposing undue regulatory burden and costs on the sector?

Refer to the detail in our submission. There is little detail as to what the proposed consumer standards are and what improved service standards look like or how they would be measured. The formation and operation of another regulatory authority and ombudspersons would contribute to the costs of the sector, noting that Government are proposing that it be funded by a new levy or tax to be paid by industry.

7. Do the proposed functions and powers of the ACO provide sufficient capability to efficiently resolve consumer complaints and improve consumer standards? If not, what should change and why?

Based on the information provided it is hard to answer this question without seeing the final legislation and regulations. Whilst the proposed functions and powers are aligned with the functions and powers of other ombudsperson roles within government no detail has been provided as to the actual process, avenues of decision review, appeal, penalties, or fines.

About The RAAA & Regional Aviation

The Regional Aviation Association of Australia (RAAA) is a not-for-profit organisation formed in 1980 to protect, represent, and promote the combined interests of its regional aviation organisations across Australia.

Airline members include Alliance, Airnorth, Link Airways, Marooomba, Nexus, QantasLink, Rex, Sharp Airlines, Skytrans, Skippers and Virgin Australia Regional Airlines (VARA). Other members include airports, engineering and flight training organisations, finance and insurance companies and government entities. RAAA's members operate successful, and in most cases, growing businesses providing employment and economic sustainability within regional and remote areas of Australia.

The RAAA has approximately 128 members who together directly employ over 10,000 people, many in regional areas. On an annual basis, the RAAA's Air Operator Certificate (AOC) members jointly turnover more than \$1.5 billion, carry well more than two million passengers and move over 23 million kilograms of freight. Our regional airport members also provide and manage critical infrastructure across Australia.[2]

The RAAA's members provide critical connectivity services between regional communities and city centres which enables those living in remote and regional locations to access services such as healthcare and education. It also facilitates the delivery of services to regional communities including emergency medical or disaster relief services, transport of FIFO workers and the delivery of cargo and mail. Given the geography of Australia and the proportion of Australians residing in remote or regional locations, the regional aviation sector is vital to ensuring Australians can access the services they need.

In addition, regional aviation is critical to the Australian economy, acting as an enabler to the mining, oil and gas, construction, manufacturing, and higher education industries. More than 60,000 Australians work more than 350km from their usual place of residence, with many workers in the mining, oil and gas industries working in very remote areas. The Aviation White Paper notes that there are already limited services available on regional routes and decreasing competition on those routes, and that while 278 regional aerodromes were serviced in Australia in 1984, only 163 were serviced in 2021.

The regional aviation sector was severely impacted by COVID-19. One of Australia's largest regional carriers, Rex, is currently in administration and prior to this Bonza collapsed. Since the 1990s more than twenty regional airlines in Australia have gone out of business. Many regional routes in Australia continue to be operated on an unprofitable basis and some require both State and Federal Government subsidies to maintain continuity of service.

Contact Details

Regional Aviation Association of Australia

Contact: Mr Rob [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Address: 2/25 Murray Crescent Griffith ACT 2603

Website: www.raaa.com.au