

Queensland Airports Limited submission Aviation Customer Rights Charter

Queensland Airports Limited (QAL) is grateful to the Department for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Aviation Customer Rights Charter (the Charter) Consultation Paper.

QAL supports the intention of an Aviation Customer Rights Charter to provide the travelling public with greater confidence and service throughout their aviation journey. We also welcome the establishment of an Aviation Industry Ombuds Scheme – a necessary replacement to the ineffectual Airline Customer Advocate.

We recognise the Charter is in early draft stage and so have provided recommendations and points for consideration on each of the proposed rights in their existing order. We have also included general recommendations and background information on QAL to give further context to our position.

Background

QAL is a Queensland-based company that owns and operates Gold Coast, Townsville, Mount Isa and Longreach airports. We are the largest regional airport operator in Australia, and welcomed 8.2 million passengers across our four ports in CY2024, with 626,000 of these being international travellers.

Gold Coast Airport is QAL's largest port and the sixth busiest airport in Australia, servicing 6.2 million passengers last year, totalling 5.75m domestic passengers and 626k international travellers.

Currently, Gold Coast Airport has international connections to New Zealand, serviced by Jetstar and Air New Zealand, as well as a Bali connection facilitated by Virgin Australia. We also welcomed back a seasonal Hong Kong service this year with Hong Kong Airlines, running for four weeks over the Chinese Lunar New Year Period.

Townsville Airport is Australia's 11th busiest airport, with more than 1.6m passengers passing through the terminal in 2024. While the airport has not facilitated international Regular Public Transport (RPT) services since 2018, it does continue to welcome international charters, particularly in support of Defence exercises.

In the recently approved Townsville Airport Master Plan 2023, QAL and its city and tourism partners committed to re-securing international RPT services to Townsville Airport.

Mount Isa and Longreach Airports both play a critical regional role in the North Western and Central West Queensland communities. Last year, Mount Isa Airport welcomed 237k passengers, while Longreach Airport saw 33k passengers pass through the terminal. Both airports' passenger mix is largely business based, with a high frequency of travel in Mount Isa due to the nature of the fly-in fly-out market.

Both ports also play a critical role within the local region by providing air access for their communities, especially during times of crisis and in medical emergencies. They are also both part of the Department of Transport and Main Road's regulated air services, that aims to ensure regional Queensland communities have access to health, education and employment services.

Level of complaints

At the outset of this submission, it's important to note that airports, proportionally, receive very few complaints each year. On average, across QAL's four airports, 0.0005% of customers complained after using our services in 2024. This equates to 372 of the 8.2m customers that passed through our terminals.

While not required under the ACCC's Airports Quality of Service Review, Gold Coast Airport voluntarily shares its complaints and compliments data with the Department each quarter. These reports include the key areas of complaints and how the airport responded directly or engaged other stakeholders responsible.

While we are not privy to airline complaint data, we assume that the bulk of complaints – which have been the catalyst for the Aviation Industry Ombuds Scheme and Customer Rights Charter – are directed towards airlines and government agencies. Rightly so, this should be reflected in the funding and compliance arrangements for the Scheme.

QAL recommendations

General

1. Given the finalised Charter will be a legislative instrument, QAL recommends that further information is provided to industry and consumers on how the Charter will intersect with existing protection mechanisms, such as Australian Consumer Law, anti-discrimination laws and privacy laws.
2. QAL recommends that consideration is given to how the government will manage customer expectations around compensation and the Customer Rights Charter. Particularly, given government agencies are excluded, which will lead to misaligned outcomes for consumers.
3. QAL recommends further information be included on how the government will measure the Charter's success and how the Customer Satisfaction Surveys will be undertaken successfully.
4. The Charter references "the aviation journey", which is open to interpretation. For example, this could be interpreted to include a taxi the customer took to the airport. QAL recommends the government defines the scope of the Charter more clearly.
5. QAL recommends the government consider how the Charter intersects with Aeronautical Services Agreements (ASAs), which take many years to negotiate and typically cover five-to-10-year periods. Should the outcomes of the Charter increase costs or require additional information to be included in ASAs, then these complex documents would need to be renegotiated so as to avoid any unintentional adverse impact upon airports, airlines and the travelling public, or they would need to be funded by government or an alternative mandated mechanism. How these binding ASAs could be reopened for negotiation to deal with this issue without legislative intervention is not immediately apparent unless these charges are deemed as 'government mandated' as per security.

Proposed Right 1

6. QAL recommends that more clearly definable terms than 'respect and dignity' are considered, or greater context is given in the Charter.

7. QAL recommends the Charter provides further guidance on what languages and information formats are appropriate, bearing in mind airports differing size, complexity and customer base.
8. QAL recommends the Department of Home Affairs undertakes a nationwide awareness campaign to educate passengers on their obligations, rights and what to expect at the screening point, including potential inconsistencies across airports, as well as information on when frisk searches are required.

Proposed Right 2

9. QAL recommends the Charter clarify accountability re the provision of flight information given the known issues around information flow between airlines and airports.
10. QAL recommends that both Domestic and International airlines are subject to the Charter.

Proposed Right 3

11. QAL recommends the Charter clearly define what an airline is responsible for and when an airport would be considered responsible.
12. QAL recommends that government agencies are included within the Ombuds Scheme and therefore covered under the Charter.
13. QAL recommends further clarity around the requirements or responsibilities of the different entities should a flight have boarded but have a delayed take off for longer than 1 hour.
14. QAL recommends that customers seeking remediation engage with their airline given this is where the primary (or often, only) contractual relationship exists. Airlines can then seek further information and redress from relevant stakeholders.

Proposed Right 4

15. QAL recommends that further clarity is provided in the Charter, noting airlines as the usual responsible entity for baggage handling claims, unless in exceptional circumstances.

Proposed Right 5

16. As aviation operators are already bound by the Australian Privacy Principles, QAL recommends this right is removed from the Charter.

Proposed Right 6

17. QAL recommends the blanket statement in the Charter referencing airports needing to *improve* their complaints handling systems be altered considering the maturity of most airport's systems.
18. QAL recommends the option for a 'legal representative' to represent a customer is removed, given it could inadvertently create a no win/no fee business model for "flight delay chasers", which goes against the spirit of the Charter.
19. QAL recommends further clarity on whether an automatic response constitutes acknowledgement of a complaint, and suggests rather than all complaints being resolved within 30 days, a 90% target would be more realistic.

Proposed Right 1: Be treated with dignity and respect, in an accessible and inclusive environment

Dignity & respect

QAL believes that everyone has a right to be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their abilities.

We are keenly focused on making our airports and workplaces welcoming and inclusive environments for customers, communities and team members. We have introduced industry-leading support programs and initiatives, under the guidance of our All Abilities Reference Group which is made up of people with lived experience of disability, and we look forward to welcoming the Department to Gold Coast Airport for an Accessibility Walkthrough.

While we agree that everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect, and we always strive to do so in our airports, we also recognise that ‘dignity and respect’ mean different things to different people. What one person feels is a dignified and respectful experience may be interpreted very differently by somebody else.

Relying on principle-based terms that are difficult to define, could lead to costly litigation dissecting what does and doesn’t constitute dignity or respect, particularly given financial remedies are available. QAL recommends that more clearly definable terms are considered, or greater context is given in the Charter.

Languages & wayfinding

The Consultation Paper refers to airports providing information to passengers in a range of accessible formats and other languages. Currently, Gold Coast Airport provides wayfinding in English, as well as simplified Chinese and Japanese.

The Gold Coast Airport website hosts all information about the terminal, its facilities and what passengers can expect in English. We also offer the ReciteMe accessibility toolbar to ensure our website is user friendly for people with disabilities. In Q2 2025, we are launching a new Content Management System (CMS) which will see the website translatable into Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

The Gold Coast Airport terminal is also equipped with hearing loops, braille signage and tactile ground surface indicators to facilitate unassisted navigation. Our accessibility webpage also includes Sensory Maps, Social Stories and many other aids to assist passengers with additional needs.

Townsville, Mount Isa and Longreach airports, given their customer base and few international services, provide information and wayfinding in English. From April 2025, when the new CMS launches, QAL has engaged Cerge – a disability information technology provider – to produce visual stories and sensory guides, as well as audio and virtual tours of all three northern airports.

QAL recommends that the Charter provides further guidance on what languages and information formats are appropriate, bearing in mind airports differing size, complexity and customer base.

Security screening

QAL recognises that the security screening process makes some passengers feel anxious and uncertain. This is often exacerbated as processes and equipment differ across, and even within airports, leaving passengers confused by what's expected of them.

Positively, recent changes to the Aviation Screening Notice and upcoming new equipment requirements, will bring more consistency throughout Australia's airports, leading to a more predictable passenger experience.

In line with other airports, Gold Coast and Townsville Airport receive more complaints about security screening than any other area of the airport experience (albeit complaint numbers are low). The core of these complaints is passengers not understanding what to expect from the screening process or that screening is compulsory for everyone. QAL engaged closely with Government following the introduction of enhanced security requirements, and has CT and body scanners at Gold Coast and Townsville Airports. However, as airports are at different stages of transitioning from metal detectors to CT scanners, this has created inconsistency and confusion around the screening process.

QAL recommends that the Department of Home Affairs undertakes a nationwide awareness campaign, working together with airports to educate passengers on their obligations, rights and what to expect at the screening point, including if frisk searches are required.

Importantly, customers should understand that they need to treat our team members with dignity and respect too. The Rights Charter should be applicable both ways.

Everyone who works at QAL's airports is considered an ambassador for the airport and therefore, in line with our Customer Service Charter, are expected to put the customer at the heart of everything they do.

QAL works closely with its security contractor to provide customers with a frictionless screening experience while maintaining an effective security outcome that meets our legislative obligations. We provide regular training, testing and feedback from customers, as well as Hidden Disability awareness programs and the use of communication boards for non-verbal or non-English speaking customers.

Inevitably, human errors and inconsistencies occur, which can lead to customer complaints. In the event of a complaint, we, in tandem with our security contractor investigate the situation thoroughly and if necessary, provide further training to the team member involved, then close the loop with the complainant explaining what actions have been taken.

Proposed Right 2: Aviation industry customers have the right to accurate, timely and accessible information and customer service

Timely information

QAL strives to provide its customers with transparent, timely and accurate information. For example, our carparking Terms & Conditions are easy to understand and directly linked from the homepage. For drive up customers, these same Terms & Conditions appear on the large digital screen before a ticket is produced.

For flight information however, we, as with other airports, either rely directly on airlines or engage a third-party supplier who relies on airlines to provide flight information. We acknowledge that often

the flight information on our website isn't accurate and do provide a disclaimer to this effect, but despite the flight board refreshing every two minutes, oftentimes it's the airline or appointed ground handler that hasn't provided an update regarding their services in a timely manner.

QAL recommends that the Charter clarify accountability given the known issues around information flow and ownership of the data.

Additionally, QAL recommends that both Domestic and International airlines are subject to the Charter. Consistency in level, style and format of information is critical for an improved customer experience.

Customer service

The Charter and Aviation Industry Ombudsperson's ambition is to uplift customer experience across the aviation system. Therefore, QAL strongly recommends that government agencies are party to the scheme. This includes Airservices Australia (which is referenced in the following section of this paper), as well as Home Affairs and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. These agencies form a critical part of the customer experience journey and are often responsible for visitors' first impressions of Australia. As international visitor numbers continue to grow, queuing and congestion at the international border will worsen. This offers a poor customer experience and does not reflect Australia's position as a modern and innovative country. Greater investment in smart technology offers improved customer service and the opportunity for government to offer international border services in a more cost-effective manner.

Proposed Right 3: Aviation industry customers have the right to prompt and fair remedies and support during and after cancellations, delays and disruptions

Response to flight delays and cancellations

There is a myriad of reasons why flight delays, cancellations and disruptions occur. Most often, the responsible parties are weather, airlines, Airservices Australia and, rarely, airports.

While QAL is supportive of the three-hour threshold for remedies to be made available, which is in-line with other international compensation schemes, QAL recommends that the Charter clearly define situations when an airline would be responsible for a delay or disruption, and when airports would be considered responsible. For example, delays due to bad weather, engineering or crew constraints would be the airline's responsibility, whereas a security breach or a baggage system or infrastructure outage would sit with the airport.

Inevitably there will be situations that are out of any entity's control e.g. extraordinary bad weather or industrial action. Regardless of responsibility, airports and airlines work closely together, enacting crisis communication plans and on-ground customer care teams to support stranded customers.

Airservices Australia

QAL recommends that government agencies are included within the Ombuds Scheme and therefore covered under the Charter. Airservices Australia's ongoing workforce shortages continue to contribute to poor customer outcomes, with a lack of appropriate staffing within Air Traffic Control (ATC) causing cancellations, delays and disrupted operations.

Excluding government agencies will lead to confusion among passengers and misaligned outcomes, causing an even poorer experience and creating reputational harm for the Australian aviation system overall.

Amenities & refreshments

QAL also seeks further clarity around the requirements or responsibilities of the different entities should a flight have boarded but have a delayed take off for longer than 1 hour. The Charter references provision of amenities and refreshments, however it is unclear whether the airline or airport is responsible for providing these.

Remediation process

QAL recommends that customers facing three-hour plus disruptions go through the remediation process via their airline given this is where the primary commercial relationship exists. Airlines can then seek further information and redress from relevant stakeholders. Customers wouldn't find it intuitive to contact the airport (an infrastructure provider) for a financial remedy.

Proposed Right 4: Aviation industry customers have the right to safe and timely baggage handling and fair remedies for damage and delays

Airline Baggage Handlers who load and unload baggage are largely contractors of airlines. Within these contracts, there are typically targets in place to ensure safe and timely baggage handling service. Therefore, if bags are damaged or delayed, it is the airline's responsibility to award remedies.

Airports provide Baggage Handling Systems – the conveyor system that transports checked luggage to areas where the bags are prepared to be loaded and unloaded from planes. Rarely, bags are damaged because of the Baggage Handling System, however the most common reason this occurs is due to overloading from the Baggage Handlers themselves. The chain of responsibility is then blurred when customers seek restitution.

The only clear case of damage being the airport's responsibility is if it occurs during screening. In these instances, QAL would resolve directly with the passenger involved.

QAL recommends that further clarity is provided in the Charter, noting airlines as the responsible entity unless in exceptional circumstances.

Proposed Right 5: Aviation industry customers have the right to the protection of their personal information

While QAL supports the governance, transmission and storage of customer personal identifiable information in accordance with the Charter, we believe that given current and pending general data privacy laws, this proposed right is an unnecessary inclusion.

Aviation operators are already bound by the Australian Privacy Principles, therefore QAL recommends this right is removed from the Charter.

Proposed Right 6: Aviation industry customers have the right to provide feedback, make complaints and exercise their rights without retribution

Complaint Handling System

QAL has mature complaint handling systems in place to monitor, track and learn from customers' feedback. Complaints are dealt with, escalated or referred on as appropriate, before giving feedback to the complainant to close the loop and resolve.

QAL notes the wording in the Charter references "airlines and airports will *improve* their complaint handling systems". QAL doesn't believe that it needs to improve what is an established system already and recommends that this blanket statement is altered.

As mentioned earlier, QAL receives very few complaints each year. Just 0.0005% of customers complained in 2024, equating to 372 of the 8.2m customers that passed through our terminals.

We also voluntarily share Gold Coast Airport's complaints and compliments data with the Department each quarter. These reports include the key areas of complaints and how the airport responded directly or engaged other stakeholders responsible.

Legal representatives supporting customers

QAL supports family members, carers or disability advocates representing customers with a complaint, however fears that allowing legal representation could inadvertently create a no win/no fee business model for "flight delay chasers" - companies set up to solely pursue compensation.

This is not in the spirit of the Charter, which has the intent of providing customers more confidence and better services across the aviation system. QAL recommends the option for a 'legal representative' to represent a customer is removed from the Charter.

Target timings

QAL notes the Charter's target timelines of 24 hours to acknowledge and 30 days to resolve complaints. If an automatic response message noting receipt of the complaint constitutes acknowledgement, then QAL supports this timeline. If not, then this target unfairly disadvantages regional airports with smaller teams.

If an auto response is not suitable, then QAL recommends a more realistic 3-business day acknowledgement to factor in weekends and public holidays.

While QAL largely supports the 30-day resolution timeline, it would be more realistic if the target was for 90% of complaints to be resolved within this period. There will inevitably be one or two unusual complaints that may not get settled within the prescribed period.

Finally, 'resolve' can be an ambiguous term as it's not always possible to completely satisfy a customer's complaint. What one person may consider resolved can be different to another.

Next steps

QAL again offers its thanks to the Department for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Aviation Customer Rights Charter.

Should the Department have any questions or comments then please feel free to reach out to Queensland Airports Limited via: [REDACTED]