

I run a small business of 9 employees, in healthcare consulting. 95% of our work is supporting non-profit health entities and services, and about 70% of our work is in rural and remote health, as I passionately believe people living in rural and remote Australia deserve better access to health care.

As recognised in the green paper, level of flight cancellations is currently very high, and airline communication with and support for travelers following cancellations is very poor. As airlines are relatively monopolistic on routes, they seem not to feel the need to support consumers. Here are some real life examples we have experienced in our business:

Example one - a Melbourne-Brisbane flight cancellation and an airline will not allow the consumer to change the ticket to a Melbourne-Gold Coast flight on the same day because it is a route change.

Example two - an Orange-Sydney flight cancellation, we were given one option for another flight that didn't suit, so we rang and after a 40 minute wait on the phone answered but their systems down. We were forced to pay for hotel accommodation.

Example three - we have flight credits with an airline that we cannot redeem, because I will not allow a staff member to have to wait 3 hours on the phone to get login details (different login for redeeming credits).

I strongly support action that will improve complaint handling processes and strengthen consumer protections in the airline sector. The state of our industry is embarrassing. However I'm not sure an Ombudsman type model will work (why would route monopolies care?) and I don't support an insurance model (why should consumers have to pay for insurance against poor performance of the company they are buying a produce from?)

Frankly, what is needed is either (a) stronger regulation of airline companies, or (b) much more competition to force better customer service (i.e. greater cabotage rights for foreign airlines).

If option a is chosen, I propose the government and airlines set standards about the % of flights that are simply cancelled for any reason other than mechanical safety e.g. if more than x% of flights are cancelled, they compensate consumers above and beyond the fare. This already occurs for trains in Victoria, I believe. Airlines must have spare standby staff in case of illness, to reduce flight cancellations. Businesses can plan for these things. I know this is difficult given current staffing shortages and may push up fare prices. Maybe some flights could be earmarked as "have standby staff" so that consumers and business travellers at least know they have more protection.

Airlines must pay for all reasonable costs consumers and small businesses bear as a result of flight cancellations for any reason other than mechanical safety. This includes hotels, hire cars, and airport parking for rearranging travel plans. One of the airlines is doing a very good job here. Others are not.

Airlines must allow consumers to change their flight route, if there is a cancellation, to make it easier to rearrange travel. For example if Mildura-Sydney is cancelled, an airline must allow a consumer to travel Mildura-Melbourne-Sydney if that is the next best option. Or if Gold Coast-Sydney is cancelled, Brisbane-Sydney must be allowed.

Thank you for this opportunity and I would be happy to be contacted to discuss further.