



## Australians stranded in the United Kingdom

International airlines have told the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA)<sup>1</sup> that there are likely some 30,000 Australians in the United Kingdom (UK) seeking to return home. Under the current tight international passenger arrival caps into Australia, it will likely take well into 2021 to return all these Australians, noting that some increase in the caps might be forthcoming. Helping the Australians who are camped out at Heathrow Airport<sup>2</sup> is necessary, but it does not stem the underlying cause of why they are stranded in the UK. That requires an increase in quarantine capacity in Australia combined with a risk-based approach to managing COVID-19.

### Australians stranded in the UK till 2021?

When it comes to returning Australians home, international airlines are constrained across all countries by the overarching international passenger arrival caps. BARA notes the recent media coverage of the situation in the UK, where Australians have resorted to camping at Heathrow Airport, is unfortunately representative of the problem in many overseas countries.

“BARA understands that many international airlines have been forced to stop selling tickets to Australians to return home until either late October or until December, including for flights out of the UK, because of the international passenger arrival caps. It is difficult to see how these Australians will be returned home before the end of 2020 under the current caps, which often limit passenger numbers to 30 or less per flight.

“Increased quarantine capacity in Australia and a risk-based approach to mitigating COVID-19 for arriving Australians are necessary to allow a more orderly return of Australians home. The caps on passengers are currently set very tight until 24 October, after which date international airlines have no certainty about the arrangements that will apply. Indeed international airlines may be forced to reduce their booked passengers after 24 October, again leaving more passengers stranded.

“The international airlines welcome statements by governments over the potential to increase the level of quarantine capacity into Australia. How useful it is to Australians stranded overseas will depend on when the permitted increases take effect and are incorporated into the per flight caps issued to international airlines.

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<sup>1</sup> BARA represents 33 airlines, which provide 90% of all international passenger flights and carry most freight to and from Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Australia in the UK@AusHCUK



“Additional quarantine capacity for international flights at secondary international airports might not be commercially viable for airlines and hence not help Australians stranded overseas. While it might be possible for some types of aircraft to fly to such airports, it would come with many challenges for international airlines. It would need commercially viable combined inbound and outbound passenger loads plus freight, which may be difficult to obtain. The international airline may also not have existing agreements in place for necessities, including fuel, aircraft servicing and baggage handling, all of which take time to establish,” Barry Abrams, Executive Director of BARA said.

### **High fixed costs and few passengers drive problems in airfares**

BARA notes the continuing commentary about the increased cost of airfares for Australians overseas to return home. Operating international flights is expensive, fuel and crew alone cost \$8,000–10,000 an hour. International flights into Australia also pay some \$5,000–8,000 per flight in fixed air navigation and firefighting services fees to the Australian Government-owned Airservices Australia.<sup>3</sup>

“International airlines can’t be expected to operate as charity services. The problems in airfares stem from government decisions that mean aircraft land into Australia largely empty. It’s easy to criticise international airlines over airfares while ignoring the fact they are expected to pay commercial operating expenses for flights into Australia but can only accept a few passengers to cover these expenses,” Mr Abrams said.

### **An ongoing toll on Australians stranded overseas**

International airlines are acutely aware of the difficult situation for many Australians stranded overseas given they are often the first line of contact. The daily toll on Australians overseas reported to international airlines is high, and includes:

- young children who, since early 2020, are yet to be reunited with their parents
- people requiring specialist medical treatment
- families sleeping on the floor of relatives’ houses
- people expecting to lose, or have lost, their job and who have exhausted their savings
- partners unable to return and support their family, including those under lockdown rules in Australia.

“International airlines have implemented triage arrangements to support the large number of cases of Australians in difficult circumstances. But so far a minimal capacity of only about five more seats a day above the international passenger arrival caps has been granted to speed up their return to Australia. This is paltry given the scale of the problem, and changes in international arrivals capacity are needed to properly fix the situation,” Mr Abrams said. **[ENDS]**

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<sup>3</sup> The Australian Government has waived air navigation and other fees charged by Airservices Australia for domestic flights but existing prices are levied on international flights.