

29 September 2023

Select Committee on Commonwealth Bilateral Air Service Agreements
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: cbasa.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Chair,

RE: Evidence at Committee Hearing – Representation of Australian Travel Accreditation Scheme

The Australian Travel Industry Association (ATIA, formerly the Australian Federal of Travel Agents), would like to provide additional information and context in relation to evidence that was given by the representative of the Consumers Federation of Australia to the Select Committee on Commonwealth Bilateral Air Service Agreements on 19 September 2023. The evidence contains representations in relation to the Australian Travel Accreditation Scheme (ATAS), which is an industry accreditation scheme administered by ATIA, which we would like to provide clarity on.

The evidence provided was as follows:

Can I add that, on the complex processes with travel agents. There is currently a self-regulatory code of conduct that covers travel agents and tour operators, called ATAS: the Australian Travel Accreditation Scheme. I think, as a self-regulatory process, it also suffers from severe limitations from a consumer protection perspective. Firstly, it's supposed to have a complaint declarations process, but the number of complaints that get there is very small. There isn't a lot of data released by the industry body that runs that scheme about the complaints and the outcome of complaints that are escalated. There was a review of that scheme recently. It recommended significant changes, including appointing consumer representatives or people with consumer experience into the governance of the scheme, which has been put off now by the industry.

To provide additional context, ATIA administers the Australian Travel Accreditation Scheme (ATAS), which is the largest and most representative accreditation scheme for travel businesses, including travel agents, tour operators, wholesalers and consolidators, in Australia.

In terms of a complaint declaration process and the number of complaints, in the calendar year to date, ATAS has received 528 complaints. The operation of ATAS is a transparent process, and ATAS publishes monthly figures in relation to complaints received, number resolved, and monies returned to consumers. The monthly breakdown is available here: <https://afta.com.au/ATAS-Accreditation/Scheme-Governance/ATAS-Complaint-Appeal-Committee-ACAC#64298-2023-monthly-reporting>.

ATAS is publicly and independently reviewed every three years. Our next review is due in 2025. We are continuing the implementation of the recommendation referred to in the evidence, as agreed to by the ATIA Board. It is being implemented in a two step process, the first which involves industry, in order to discuss the systems and processes from an industry perspective. The next step in the process will include discussions with consumer representatives.

Consumer bodies have direct say and oversight over the complaints process. Where a complaint has not been resolved in the initial stages of complaint resolution, it can be escalated to the ATAS Complaint Appeal Committee (ACAC). ACAC is an independent review body specifically established under ATAS to review and determine customer complaints and allegations of non-compliance with the ATAS Charter and Code. It is led by Independent Chair Hank Speir, former CEO of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

The ACAC is a partnership with the Consumer Federation Australia which jointly selects the Chair of the ACAC with ATIA, and appoints the consumer representatives to ACAC entirely at their discretion.

ATIA is committed to continually elevating travel industry standards in Australia by driving increased and continued participation by travel intermediaries (those who buy and sell travel) in the ATAS. It is important that the record is corrected so that businesses can continue to rely on the strengthened reputation and value proposition to the customer by being ATAS accredited, and consumers have accurate information on the benefits of booking travel through an ATAS accredited agent.

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify the operation of ATAS.

Yours sincerely

Dean Long
Chief Executive Officer