

# Sydney house prices push families north to Queensland

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© AAP Image/Dave Hunt Sydneysiders are taking advantage of more affordable housing in Queensland.

As Sydney house prices rise and traffic congestion worsens, some enterprising workers are moving north to seek the lifestyle they want in Queensland while continuing their careers in NSW.

Belinda Kerr and Michael Trehy discovered the best of both worlds after moving in January from Killarney Heights in Sydney's northern suburbs to Kiels Mountain near Maroochydore on Queensland's sunshine coast. Each Tuesday Ms Kerr flies to Sydney for two days to run her recruitment company from its Surry Hills office, leaving her husband to care for their eight-year-old twins Molly and Ivy. She works from home on Mondays and Fridays.

Ms Kerr said leaving her family each week is a huge sacrifice that "pulls at the heartstrings" but it has allowed them to afford to buy a family home, previously out of reach in Sydney.

"Every year in Sydney was another year that we were paying rent ... and [house] prices were going the wrong way for us," Mr Trehy said. "I think that was the clincher, just realising we could have a similar lifestyle up here to Sydney without the pressure of having a huge mortgage."

The couple bought a four-bedroom home with an in-ground pool and separate studio accommodation for when family come to stay. They paid \$670,000 in October last year.

"If we'd bought this in Sydney it would have cost at least double, maybe \$1.5 million," Ms Kerr said.

They did the sums and, even with the cost of weekly flights and two nights' accommodation, it worked out cheaper to buy in Queensland and for Ms Kerr to work in Sydney than to pay a Sydney mortgage.

She now spends less time commuting than she did when travelling to work in Sydney five days a week.



© Fairfax Media/Glenn Hunt Belinda Kerr at home on Queensland's sunshine coast with husband Michael Trehy and daughters Molly, left, and Ivy.

The family is part of a growing number of people living and working in separate cities through fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) arrangements, according to Graeme Hugo, professor of geography at the University of Adelaide.

"I think it's an emerging trend," he said. "It does appear as though housing affordability, or availability within a certain price range, is really becoming limited for even middle-income earners, so it's one of the ways of adapting. In the past people have adapted by moving further and further out to the suburbs; this is the logical extension of that."

Professor Hugo said professional couples unable to find good jobs in the same city were also commuting interstate.

FIFO work has been documented extensively in the mining industry. However, census data tells only part of the story for white-collar workers.

In 2011, of those working in greater Sydney on census night, more than 3400 lived in Queensland and 3300 in Victoria.

Of these, it is not clear how many were genuine FIFO workers, as those counted may have been at a one-off interstate meeting, or may have been working from home on census night. To help rectify this, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is considering including a question in next year's census about whether people have second homes.

The census also examines people's modes of transport to work, but does not include plane travel as an option. This omission showed that outside the mining industry, fly-in-fly-out work is still an emerging trend, social demographer Mark McCrindle said.

"It was never possible in the past but now, with the availability and affordable cost of flights, the ability to use that travel time to work, and the increase in technology, people are able to work a couple of days from home and work interstate for a couple of days.

"And because there's such a massive house price difference across some of our capital cities, that does make the fly-in-fly-out option actually viable."

That price difference allowed Sid Shukla, his partner Simone Matteson and their three children to live mortgage-free after they sold their home in Earlwood, in Sydney's inner west, last year and bought in the Queensland suburb of Doonan, near Noosa.

"Financially it was a no-brainer," said Mr Shukla, who spends three days each week in Sydney working at his video production company.

"In Sydney we pay all these millions of dollars for our property and we've got to live under the flight path with terrible roads and traffic. And we just felt like, why are we pushing ourselves so hard in Sydney just to be able to live? There must be a better solution," Mr Shukla said.

The couple bought their four-bedroom Doonan home for \$575,000, plus a studio apartment in Chippendale, around the corner from his office – and they still came out ahead.

The move also offered a more laidback lifestyle to raise their children and Ms Matteson is under less pressure to return to work as a teacher until the children are older.

"Even if I'm stressed for a day or two [in Sydney], I'm back up north in a couple of hours, and it feels so close it's almost like I'm in Sydney's northern beaches."

While Ms Kerr and Mr Shukla own their own businesses, both say it would not be difficult for many employers to allow their workers the flexibility required to live and work in different states.

"If I can do it, anyone could potentially do it," Mr Shukla said. "I just don't think they've thought outside the square."