

COST OF LIVING REPORT

July 2020

Issue
28

Snapshot of Four Key Areas -
Utilities, Food, Transport and
Housing



Northern Territory Council of Social Service

About NTCOSS

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) is a peak body for the Social and Community Sector in the NT and an advocate for social justice on behalf of people and communities in the NT who may be affected by poverty and disadvantage.

NTCOSS is a member of the nationwide Councils of Social Service (COSS) network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). The membership of NTCOSS includes community based, not for profit service providers in the social welfare area such as consumer groups, Indigenous and mainstream organisations and interested individuals.

NTCOSS' vision is for

"A fair, inclusive and sustainable Northern Territory where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from all aspects of social, cultural and economic life."

NTCOSS' mission is

"To promote an awareness and understanding of social issues throughout the NT community and to strive towards the development of an equitable and just society."

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INTRODUCTION

This is the 28th Cost of Living Report that NTCOSS has produced since 2013. The reports generally alternate between a focus on a specific expenditure area significant for low income and vulnerable households across the Northern Territory (e.g. utilities, transport or food) and shorter reports which provide an update on cost of living issues for Darwin and regional and remote areas of the NT.

This report, however, focuses on four key expenditure areas - utilities, food, transport and housing – looking at trends in price levels, price movement and expenditure patterns over the last decade in order to analyse affordability issues for low income and vulnerable households. The report also highlights specific recommendations for these areas in light of the upcoming NT Election.

The report draws on price and expenditure data using Darwin, Territory-wide and national figures. The report includes data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Household Expenditure Survey (HES) data and water account data, as well as information from the Utilities Commission of the Northern Territory.

Further to this, regional food, transport and housing data is also highlighted, for example using NT Government Market Basket Survey (MBS) Data, Economic Brief (Fuel) data and MyFuel NT data. The report also sources information from the Australian Automobile Association (AAA) and SGS Economics and Planning's Transport Affordability Index (TAI), as well as the Real Estate Institute of the Northern Territory (REINT) and Anglicare's Annual Rental Affordability Snapshot data.

NTCOSS has attempted to use the most recent figures available to ensure currency of data. This does mean, given the variability in the sources of data, that there are some different time periods referred to for some cost of living areas (e.g. the most recent CPI data is for the quarter ending March 2020, while NT Government Economic Brief (Fuel) data available is for June 2020, as is My Fuel NT data).

Analyses of figures over the past decade allows for an examination of the impacts of various initiatives designed to reduce cost of living pressures for low income Territorians – e.g. introduction of Outback Stores and changes to store licensing regulations and changes to concessions with the introduction of the NT Concession Scheme and Seniors Recognition Scheme.

This report is also being released during unprecedented times. A number of measures have recently been announced through the Federal and NT Government stimulus packages that have improved affordability issues (temporarily at this stage) for a number of the cost of living issues raised in this report. It is important to acknowledge in particular the introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement payment of \$550 per fortnight that has been paid to a large number of income support recipients for six months from the end of April 2020, which will continue from September 25 – December 31 2020, but the additional payment will reduce from \$550 to \$275 per fortnight (Australian Government 2020, p.1).

NTCOSS would like to thank in particular Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation, the Real Estate Institute of the Northern Territory (REINT) Anglicare National Office for their generous sharing of reports with us.

Glossary: Acronyms used in this report

AAA	Australian Automobile Association
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCC	Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AEMC	Australian Energy Market Commission
AIP	Australian Institute of Petroleum
ALPA	Arnhem Land Progress Association
AMSANT	Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CPL	Cents per litre
DLGHCS	Department of Local Government Housing and Community Development
DTF	Department of Treasury and Finance [NT]
HES	Household Expenditure Survey [ABS]
HFB	Healthy Food Basket
IM	Income Management
kL	Kilolitres
kWh	Kilowatts per hour
MBS	Market Basket Survey
MSG	Managed by a Store Group
NECF	National Energy Customer Framework
NPA	National Partnership Agreement
NPY	Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara [Women's Council]
NT	Northern Territory
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
OSG	Owned by a Store Group
REINT	Real Estate Institute of the Northern Territory
SGS	SGS Economics and Planning
TAI	Transport Affordability Index
TCAC	Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation

Note the Term 'JobSeeker Payment' will be use throughout this report rather than Newstart Allowance which was the previous name for this payment.

SNAPSHOT OF KEY FINDINGS – UTILITIES

Household Expenditure on Utilities in the Northern Territory

- NT households have high average expenditure on electricity and water
- Both electricity and water prices have increased over the past decade
 - NT households however have low to moderate electricity and water tariff charges
 - Tariff rates are set at a rate under the true cost of providing electricity and water
 - Average disposable incomes in the NT are high

Electricity Affordability for households with Standard Meters

- The affordability of electricity for households with standard meters in the Territory is poor when compared with the 75% of households in the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF*) jurisdictions on a market offer contract (excluding Tasmania)
 - Low Income households in the NT use 8.8% of their disposable income on electricity vs Average Income households in the NT who use 3.7% of their disposable income
 - 3.5% of residential customers in the NT were disconnected for non-payment in 2018/19
 - This rate of disconnections is extremely high compared with the rate of 1.1% for National Energy Customer Framework (NECF*) jurisdictions
- **The NT is the second least affordable jurisdiction for both low income and average income households** compared with the 75% of households in the NECF on a market offer contract (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p. iii,7,9,28)

Electricity Affordability for households with Prepayment Electricity Meters

- For households in Town Camps and remote communities, and low income households across the NT, affordability of electricity is a critical issue

Pre-payment meters and “Involuntary ‘Self-Disconnections’” in urban areas of the NT

- 62% of the households in urban areas of the NT who have digital pre-payment meters experienced at least one involuntary ‘self-disconnection’ in the 2018/19 financial year. This equates to 1480 households out of 2374 total households (Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation (TCAC) 2019a, p.15)
- Involuntary ‘self-disconnections’ are inconvenient and costly
- Lack of continuous electricity impacts on a range of household activities – such as: heating and cooling houses; storing and cooking food; bathing; washing clothes; and charging electrical equipment.

**The National Energy Customer Framework (NECF) involves New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia. The Northern Territory, Victoria and Western Australia are not included in the NECF*

Vulnerable Households

Specific vulnerable lower income groups in the NT facing electricity insecurity

- Single people over 65
- Single people under 35
- One parent family with dependent children
- Couple family with dependent children
- Public housing renters (ABS 2017)

Utilities Concessions are Working Well for Households that are Eligible

- Concessions in the NT for electricity, water and sewerage are substantial

Many low income/vulnerable groups still missing out on Electricity

Concessions

- Recipients of Jobseeker Payment and Youth Allowance are ineligible for electricity concessions despite their low incomes

Data Summary:

Utilities Prices & Expenditure

Water & Sewerage Lowest per kL charge in the county – but Expenditure High

Electricity 2nd Lowest kWh charge in the county - but Expenditure High

Gas* Expenditure Low

(Utilities Commission of the NT, p.12 Team Poly Water Solutions for Life, ABS 2017)

CPI Changes over the past decade ending March 2020

Water & Sewerage Up 93% vs national rise 51% - CPI rise highest in country

Electricity Up 41% vs national rise 66% - CPI rise 2nd lowest in country

Gas* Up 10.6% vs national rise 63.1% - CPI rise lowest in country

All Groups CPI Darwin Up 17.5% vs National rise in All Groups CPI 22.4%
(ABS 2020a)

^In the ABS Household Expenditure surveys Gas refers to Gas, heating oil and wood

**In the ABS CPI data Gas refers to Gas & other household fuels*

SNAPSHOT OF KEY FINDINGS - FOOD

Household Expenditure on Food in the Northern Territory

- The NT has high average household expenditure on food
- The price for food in Darwin as measured by the CPI for food and non-alcoholic beverages rose by only 13.5% in the past decade - 3rd lowest rise in the country
- There are high average household disposable incomes in the NT
- Expenditure* on food in the NT is 2nd highest in the country, but the proportion of income spent on food (12.3%) is the lowest (ABS 2017)
- Overall 'average' NT household data on food prices and expenditure (from ABS Household Expenditure Survey data) can appear to cast some positive light on affordability: *But these average figures exclude very remote areas/Indigenous communities and don't reflect the whole of the NT.

Averages, therefore, can hide what is happening for specific population groups

Remote food prices have increased markedly in the past decade and are extremely high

Change in Cost: Market Basket Survey, Healthy Food Basket (HFB) 2009-2019

- Cost of HFB in NT supermarkets Down \$6 (-1.0%)
- Cost of HFB in corner stores Up \$123 (18.2%)
- Cost of HFB in NT remote stores Up \$153 (22%)
(NT Government 2019a, p.16; 2020b, p.9)

Price comparison of Healthy Food Basket (HFB) between different store types

- HFB in corner stores (\$800) costs 47% more vs NT supermarkets (\$542)
- HFB in remote stores (\$848) costs 56% more vs NT supermarkets (\$542)
- In some remote stores in the Alice Springs (\$1,116) and Katherine (\$1,150) regions, the HFB costs between 106% and 112% more than in a NT supermarket (NT Government 2020b, p.9)

Affordability of the Healthy Food Basket (HFB)

- Purchasing the HFB at remote store requires 32% of fortnightly income vs 20% of fortnightly income to purchase the same basket in a Darwin supermarket (Centrelink 2019; NT Government 2020b, p.9)

Healthy Food Basket (HFB): Average Costs 2019 (by region)

Major Supermarkets

Darwin \$517 East Arnhem \$552 Katherine \$569 Alice Springs \$530

Remote Stores

Darwin \$832 East Arnhem \$888 Katherine \$863 Alice Springs \$840

Corner Stores

Darwin \$757 East Arnhem N/A Katherine \$907 Alice Springs \$736

(NT Government 2020b, p.9)

Store Management/Ownership Model of Remote Stores: Impact on Costs

In the NT, some stores are owned by a community or Aboriginal corporation, some are privately owned; others are leased from the community and some are owned by a store group (OSG) or managed by a store group (MSG), such as Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) Stores or Outback Stores.

Cost of Healthy Food Basket (HFB) in Managed Store Group Stores (MSG) vs Community Stores^ 2020

NT average:

- Cost of HFB 9.6% lower in MSG stores vs Community Store
- Cost of HFB 3.9% higher in a private stores vs Community Store

Alice Springs Region Average:

- Cost of HFB 14.2% lower in MSG stores vs Community Store
- Cost of FHB the same in Private Stores vs Community Stores (small sample)

Other Regions

- Disaggregated data for Darwin, East Arnhem, Katherine regions not available (NT Government 2020b, p. 31-33)
- **The variety and quality of fresh fruit and vegetables in Remote Stores has increased overall since 2000** (NT Government 2020b, p.13).

^In the 2019 Market Basket Survey, the disaggregated store data had only MSG stores listed and no OSG stores. Community Stores include Aboriginal Owned stores for this comparison

SNAPSHOT OF KEY FINDINGS – TRANSPORT

Household Expenditure on Transport in the Northern Territory

- The NT has relatively high average household expenditure on transport
- Over the past decade the rise in CPI for transport in Darwin (17.2%) was the highest in the country (ABS 2020a, ABS 2017)

Transport Affordability

- High average disposable household incomes in the NT means that for some households (excluding very remote areas/Indigenous communities) transport costs are relatively affordable (especially in Darwin)

Averages hide what is happening for specific population groups in the NT

- The lowest income households in the NT spend a much greater proportion of income on transport costs (16%), compared with those in higher income brackets (All households average is 10.4%) (ABS 2017)
- Households in regional and remote areas face very steep fuel prices (despite drops in regional centres since the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia)
- The average unleaded fuel price for regional NT is the highest in the country, despite recent price falls:
 - The Tennant Creek (175.9 cpl) and Alice Springs (171.4) regions have very high unleaded fuel prices – around **60 cpl higher** than the Darwin price
 - The Katherine region unleaded prices (134.5 cpl) are around **20 cpl higher** than in Darwin (NT Government 2020d, p.1)

Some remote communities have astronomical fuel prices –

Prices on 4 July 2020 as high as:

- **Low Aromatic Fuel: 273.0 cpl** (East Arnhem Region)
- **Unleaded 91: 250.0 cpl** (Central Australian and Katherine Regions)
- **Diesel: 253.0 cent cpl** (East Arnhem Region) (NT Government 2020e)

Motor Vehicle Registration Concession not indexed

- The MVR Concession has remained at the \$154 per 12 months (or \$77 per six months) since 2010
- Registration costs for a small vehicle have increased \$93.90 since 2010 effectively wiping out the value of the concession when compared with ten years ago (NT Government 2010b, p.1 and 2019b, p.1).

Many low income groups are still missing out on Concessions

Recipients of JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance, for example, are ineligible for electricity concessions, despite their low incomes

CPI Changes over the past decade ending March 2020

- **Transport** Up 17.2% vs Up 12.0% nationally - CPI rise highest in country
- **Fuel** Up 3.6% vs Up 14.1% nationally - CPI rise lowest in country
- **Car Prices** Down 7.4% vs Down 9.3% nationally - CPI decrease lowest in country
- **Other services in relation to motor vehicles**
Up 88.9% vs Up 48.6% nationally - CPI rise highest in country

(‘Other services’ covers MV registration, driver licence, parking fees, driving lessons)
(ABS 2020a)

Transport Affordability Index

- Darwin has the 2nd lowest expenditure on transport out of all capital cities, and is 2nd most affordable in terms of expenditure as a proportion of income.
- Alice Springs (while expenditure is lower than Darwin) has the highest expenditure on transport in a comparison with six other regional centres across the country, and is 3rd least affordable in terms of expenditure as a proportion of income – with fuel and insurance costs increasing (AAA & SGS 2020, p.27)

SNAPSHOT OF KEY FINDINGS – HOUSING

Weekly Median Rental Prices – Across the Regions

Darwin/Palmerston – strong downward movement in rental prices since 2012

- For all Darwin suburbs and Palmerston rental prices for both houses and units decreased between March 2012 and March 2020 (where figures available)
- The decreases were generally quite significant - most decreasing at a rate greater than 15% (REINT 2020, p.26-27)

Katherine/Alice Springs – Median Rental Prices more constant since 2012

- Katherine and Alice Springs had increases for most unit/townhouse rental prices
- The median rental price for 4BR houses in Katherine increased by 6.7%
- 3BR houses in Katherine and 3BR and 4BR houses in Alice Springs had zero growth or slight decreases (REINT 2020, p.26-27)

Current Weekly Median Rent Prices – March 2020

- 3BR houses: Inner Darwin highest (\$525), Alice Springs 2nd highest (\$510)
- 4BR houses: Alice Springs and Inner Darwin equal highest (\$650)
- 1BR units: Inner Darwin highest (\$320), Alice Springs 2nd highest (\$310)
- 2BR units: Alice Springs highest (\$415)
- 3BR units Alice Springs and Inner Darwin equal highest (\$515)
(REINT 2020, p.26-27)

Housing Affordability – Darwin (2020 Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot)

Only 4% of rental properties were affordable and appropriate “for at least one household type living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress” - 42 out of 1159 properties (Anglicare 2020, p.3)

“Regional analysis of the data demonstrates that it is almost impossible for households on income support payments to obtain private rental in Alice Springs and Katherine” (Anglicare 2020, p.3)

The number of unique* properties that were both affordable and appropriate in Alice Springs and Katherine, 2020

	Properties affordable and Appropriate (Number)	
Properties Advertised (No.)	Income Support Recipient	Minimum Wage Earner
Alice Springs (110)	2	1
Katherine (64)	0	21

Anglicare 2020 p.3

CPI Changes over the past decade ending March 2020

New Dwellings Up 14.0% vs 25.2 % nationally CPI rises 5th highest in country

Rents Down 0.6% vs Up 22% nationally CPI fall greatest in country
(ABS 2020a)

RECOMMENDATIONS: NTCOSS Recommendations to the Northern Territory Government:

UTILITIES

Affordable Power and Household Infrastructure and Equipment for all Territory Households

1. Ensure power is accessible, reliable, constant and affordable for all NT households
 - Work with energy providers and community organisations to ensure all customers who would meet eligibility criteria have access to NT Concessions whether pre-paid or account customers
 - Expand the eligibility criteria for the NT Concession Scheme to include people most in need, including people on JobSeeker Payment and other people eligible for a Commonwealth Health Care Card.
 - Develop initiatives for low income households to increase access to energy efficient and reliable appliances (e.g. fridges), including strategies to improve access for residents of remote communities to no-interest loan schemes (NILS)
 - Improve options for prepayment customers to set up direct payment arrangements with Centrelink

Need for a Comprehensive NT Energy Efficiency Strategy

2. Introduce a comprehensive NT Energy Efficiency Strategy including:
 - Mandatory disclosure of energy ratings for all dwellings in the NT
 - Plan for an increase in the minimum energy rating requirements
 - A commitment to ensuring all social, public and community housing in the NT meets the maximum required energy efficiency ratings
 - Energy Efficiency Stimulus Program: Small grants for households/businesses to retrofit existing houses/premises to improve energy efficiency e.g. building related, energy efficient appliances, renewable energy, including solar power– e.g. incentives for landlords, investment in a pilot of rooftop PV solar installation for public and community housing dwellings

Improvements in Data Collection

3. Develop mechanisms for the provision of timely data on usage patterns of electricity for digital pre-payment meter users, to enable households to track electricity usage over time
4. Provide resources to relevant agencies (social services, Jacana, Government agencies) to enable data collection in relation to the link between digital pre-payment meters and households who receive a concession and the rate of involuntary 'self-disconnections'

RECOMMENDATIONS: NTCOSS Recommendations to the Northern Territory Government:

FOOD

Reduction in the Cost of Healthy Food in Remote Communities

1. Introduction of targeted measures to reduce the price of healthy foods, including options for wage subsidies, subsidised freight or food subsidies to target remote areas affected by food insecurity
2. Set timeframes/targets to reduce remote store fruit/vegetable prices to Darwin supermarket average

Address Gaps in Transport to Improve Access to Cheaper Food

3. Identify and address gaps in regional centre public transport to ensure low income residents are able to shop at more affordable stores that aren't within walking distance of their homes
4. Provide capped subsidies for NT Concession Scheme recipients to use remote private transport services to regional centres to periodically shop for bulk food items and groceries

Improve Access to Cheaper Shopping Alternatives

5. Support for Food Bank Hub establishment in other parts of the NT (currently major Food Bank site in Darwin), e.g. to enable a model based on a supermarket format providing free and subsidised healthy produce that community sector agencies can i) refer clientele, and ii) order subsidised produce for current food-related activities

Improving 'Health Hardware' to Support Food Preparation and Storage

6. Strengthen adherence to the National Indigenous Housing Guide (safety and healthy living practices) to improve health hardware (in housing), to assist food preparation and storage

RECOMMENDATIONS: NTCOSS Recommendations to the Northern Territory Government:

TRANSPORT

Improve Affordability for Private Vehicles Owners

1. Extend the NT Concession Scheme to provide subsidies for remote residents using remote private transport services, and extending the MVR Concessions to all Commonwealth Health Care Card holders
2. Establishment of yearly indexation of the Motor Vehicle Registration concession, in line with the yearly increases in Registration and Compulsory Third-Party Insurance costs
3. Formally investigate the price disparity between petrol prices in remote areas and larger regional centres

Making existing Bus Services More Affordable

4. Establish a new fare structure for minibuses, so that fares are regulated, e.g. set rate per km, rather than the current fare by negotiation (where the fare structure is displayed for some but not all possible routes)
5. Establish Pension/Health Care Card concession rates for users of remote bus services (some offer only adult/child fares), and ensure consistency of fare structures across different services (e.g. some services apply adult fares to children over 15, while others for children over 17)

Development of Northern Territory Regional and Remote Public Transport Strategies

6. Conduct a review into regional and remote transport networks
7. Develop a NT remote public transport strategy to identify gaps, quantify demand and support opportunities for expansion of services to ensure a consistency of services offered across regions.
8. Further develop affordable, flexible and innovative community transport options as part of a suite of approaches required to tackle transport issues in towns and in regional and remote areas of the NT (linked to regional/remote transport strategies)

RECOMMENDATIONS: NTCOSS Recommendations to the Northern Territory Government:

HOUSING

Some Recommendations taken from NT Shelter 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission to the NT Government

Providing Certainty and Fairness for Renters

1. “Expedite comprehensive reform to the NT’s Residential Tenancy legislation to provide fair, safe and certain renting for landlords and tenants alike” [NT Shelter 2019, PRIORITY 6, p.9]

Improve Preventative Maintenance for Housing

2. Double expenditure on preventative maintenance for housing to enable more Housing for Health programs to be rolled out and ensure more Territorians have access to safe, healthy and functioning housing. [NT Shelter 2019, PRIORITY 3, p.5]
3. Ensure that all new installations of air conditioner units in social housing (public and community housing) are energy efficient and climate appropriate

Increase Social and Affordable Housing

4. “Commit to a rolling 5 year supply program” for more social and affordable housing [NT Shelter 2019, PRIORITY 1, p.1]
5. “The Northern Territory needs to build more than 700 new social and affordable houses each year to ensure all Territorians have a home to stay safe and healthy (Anglicare 2019, p. 2)

Improve Energy Efficiency for social housing

6. Establish a post-pandemic economic stimulus program focused on energy efficiency upgrades for social housing
7. Greatly expand the requirements and compliance of energy efficient building construction in the NT, including incorporating public and commercial works, and lifting the required energy star rating, which is currently below the national standard

Key Expenditure Areas for low income and disadvantaged households in the NT

Utilities – Electricity, Gas, Water and Sewerage

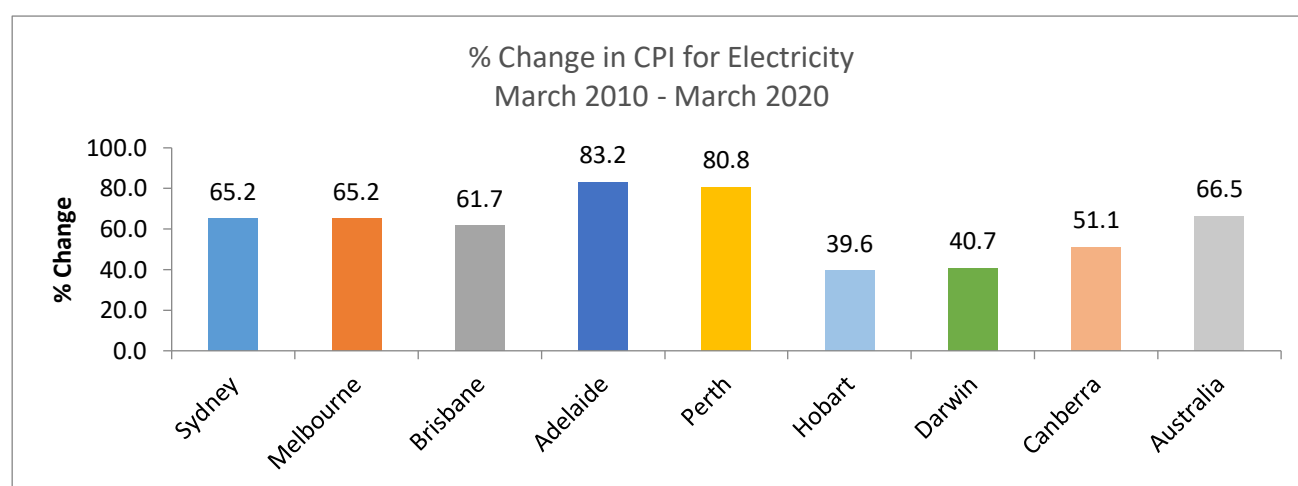
Having access to affordable utilities like electricity, gas, water and sewerage services, is critical to health and wellbeing and are a necessity and a basic right of people living in a modern society. Lack of access to these services can impact on people's ability to live healthy lives and fully engage in society. In this section NTCOSS examines whether utilities are affordable for low income and vulnerable groups across the NT.

Electricity

Price movement for electricity across the NT

Price movement is one contributor to cost of living pressures for Northern Territory households. The following graphs examine price movement for electricity, based on CPI movement for Darwin.

Figure 1: % Change in CPI for Electricity, Capital Cities 2010 - 2020

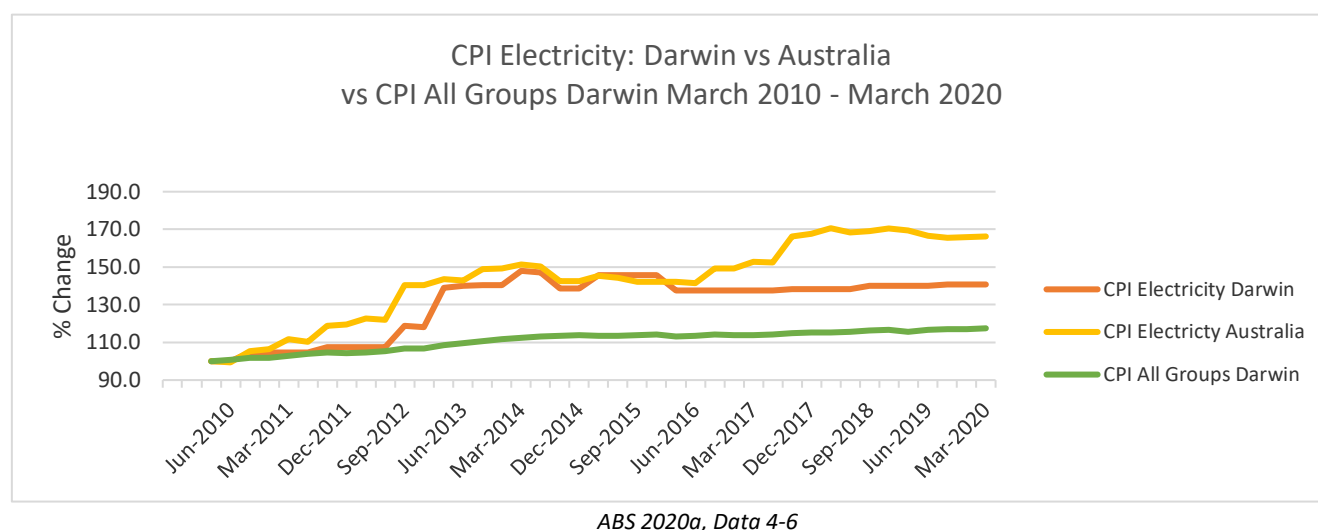


ABS 2020a, Data 1-6

CPI figures for Electricity: Capital Cities Comparison

- The CPI for electricity for Darwin increased 40.7% over the past decade
- Darwin had the second lowest rise out of all capital cities, just above the rise for Hobart
- The CPI for electricity for Darwin has generally plateaued since 2015 after some significant rises earlier in the decade, and some price fluctuations in 2014 and 2015 (ABS 2020a)
- While the rate of growth in the CPI for electricity was more than double the rate of the Darwin 'All groups' CPI (17.5%) over the past decade (ABS 2020a), it was well below the national rate of growth in CPI for electricity
- This relatively low rate of CPI growth (compared with other capital cities) has assisted in keeping electricity charges some of the lowest in the country (as per discussion below)

Figure 2: % Change over time, CPI for 'Electricity' Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2020



Price Movement for Electricity across the Northern Territory

While CPI figures for state and territories are not available, in the NT there is the same price structure for postpaid electricity across the whole of the territory. Prepaid electricity also has the same rate of charge across the NT

- This means the rate of growth in the CPI for electricity for Darwin represents the rate of growth for the Territory as a whole
- Therefore all households in the NT have benefited from the relatively low rate of growth in CPI for electricity, which has kept household bills lower than they might have been, if the rate of CPI growth followed the national rate of growth for electricity.
- Further examination however, is required in relation to expenditure patterns households – in particular for low income households, as **these figures mask deep pockets of energy poverty throughout the NT**

Influencing factors on Electricity Affordability for Households

Price movement is only one part of the equation, which can include factors such as

- the actual price paid for electricity
- expenditure (influence by consumption levels) and
- income levels of households are all factors that influence whether electricity is affordable for residential households (Utilities Commission of the NT, p.6)

National Comparison of Electricity Prices for Residential Households

- The NT has low electricity charges relative to other jurisdictions - being 2nd lowest (June 2019)
- Most states/territories offer both a Market rate and a standing offer rate – but not the NT
- In the NT (and WA) residential electricity prices are set by their respective Government
- The NT Government subsidises electricity prices making them less than the cost of supply[^]
- The unit price of electricity is not considered an issue in terms of NT high annual electricity bills (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.10-11,13).

[^]See Appendices re the NT Government's Community Services Obligation (CSO)

National Comparison of Electricity Bills and Affordability

The Utilities Commission of the NT's review compares those jurisdictions or regions covered by the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF), which are New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia. The Northern Territory, Victoria and Western Australia are not included in the NECF¹ (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.iii).

It is important to note that in order to provide a like for like comparison with other jurisdictions the commission's assessment does not include the impact of electricity concessions, which can reduce a household's electricity bill by up to \$1200 per year, for eligible households. In light of this, the Commission notes that any affordability results shown in their review "for those households are considered to be a 'worst case'" (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.7).

The majority of NECF jurisdictions (aside from Tasmania, who only have a standing offer) offer both a standing offer price and a market offer price schedule. For the NT "the defined terms of standing offer and market offer are not particularly relevant", as "the Territory has not adopted NECF", however, the "commission considers a standing offer is most aligned with the regulated tariff in the Territory" (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.8).

NT vs Standing Offer Prices, NECF jurisdictions: Low and Average Income Earners

A comparison of the NT with standing offer prices offered by NECF jurisdictions shows:

The annual electricity bill for an average NT residential customer (aprox \$2400) is mid range compared to NECF jurisdictions, similar to Tasmania and below annual bills for NSW and SA. Affordability of electricity in the NT is therefore rated as "good" in such a comparison with standing offers, being ranked 3rd for low income households and 2nd for average income households (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.9).

Given that electricity concessions are not taken into consideration in the calculations for low income households (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.8), if concessions are factored in, this would further improve affordability for those eligible households in the NT - bearing in mind however that not all low income households in the NT are eligible for concessions

There are limitations with this comparison, however, given that "75 per cent of residential customers in NECF jurisdictions (excluding Tasmania) were on a market offer contract in 2018-19... [which means] a more representative and useful comparison [for the NT] is with customers' bills under market offer contracts in NECF jurisdictions" (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.9).

¹ To enable comparison with other jurisdictions, the commission has sought to align the data reporting with the other Australian jurisdictions, where possible. However, there are some differences so any comparisons should be considered indicative only. (Utilities Commission of the NT p.iii)

National Comparison: NT vs Market Offer Prices, NECF jurisdictions (excluding Tasmania*), for low and average income households.

The average annual household electricity bill for the NT is much higher than the average bills for all of the NECF jurisdiction customers on market offer contracts

- The NT bill (approx. \$2400[^] per annum) is \$399 (16.5%) above the next highest average bill (South Australia, approx. \$2000 per year[^])
- The approximate[^] annual bills for NSW (\$1800), the ACT (\$1700), Queensland (\$1600) and Victoria are all significantly lower than the NT (Utilities Commission of the NT, 2020, p.9)

***Tasmania does not have market offers and so Tasmania not represented in the above figures**

[^]Note exact bill amounts are not shown on graphs in the Utilities Commission of the NT Report (2020, p.9) so NTCOSS has done an estimate based on the graph

Given concessions are not included in the above comparisons, these figures do help illustrate the lack of affordability for low income households not eligible for electricity concessions.

It is also important to note that expenditure figures will also have been impacted by factors like the uptake of rooftop PV solar in the last decade and some households reducing usage in efforts to reduce their carbon footprint. *These figures however, do not separate out households with Photo Voltaic solar.*

Note: In NSW and Victoria, where the representative consumer is a dual fuel consumer, the total annual energy costs paid by the consumer would be higher than represented here as it includes both electricity and gas costs (AEMC 2018, p. 4). Examining combined expenditure data on electricity and gas and other household fuels allows for a 'like for like' comparison of all jurisdictions (covered below).

Assessing Electricity Affordability

The above figures reflect the situation for the average NT household – but reflects averages at a population level – and do not speak to what may be happening for specific household types. In order to “assess electricity affordability and its impact on Territory households, the [Utilities Commission of the NT] has compared the annual electricity bill for an average Territory residential customer against the disposable income of low and average income households” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.6).

Table 1: Average Territory Residential Customer Annual Electricity Bills as a % of disposable household income - for Low and Average Income Households.

	2017/18	2018/19
Low Income Households	9.3%	8.8%
Average Income Households	3.9%	3.7%

Utilities Commission of the NT, 2020, p. 7

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Low income Households face Affordability Issues

- Low income households in the NT spend 8.8% of their disposable income on electricity, which is more than double the rate of the Territory households with average incomes
- Annual electricity bills as a percentage of disposable household income dropped slightly between 2017/18 and 2018/19 (and are also lower than 2016/17 levels)
- This therefore represents a slight improvement in affordability from the previous two years
- However 8.8% still represents a very significant portion of the weekly disposable income for a low income household – and any “even small [price] changes potentially have a large impact”
- Although marginally improving in 2018-19, the affordability of electricity in the Territory is poor compared to NECF jurisdictions’ market offer contracts, with low income households the most impacted” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.iii,7)
- In this comparison, **the NT is the second least affordable jurisdiction for both low income and average income households**, ahead of only South Australia (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.9)
- As with the comparison with standing price offers, electricity concessions payable for eligible low income households have not been factored in. Once concessions are factored in, affordability will improve – but still bearing in mind that **not all low income households in the NT are eligible for concessions**

Reasons why Electricity Affordability in the NT is poor for Low Income Households

- For both low and average income households in the NT, disposable household income compares favourably with the income levels of the NECF jurisdictions (2018/19 figures)
 - However, when compared with market offer bills (covering 75% of NECF customers) the NT and Tasmania (where only a standing offer applies) have the highest annual electricity bills
 - While the **unit price of electricity in the NT is the second lowest out of all jurisdictions**, the NT has the **highest average electricity consumption** amongst the seven[^] jurisdictions under comparison - and by a long way (nearly double the consumption of Queensland and SA)
- [^]Note: WA not involved in the comparison (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.11-12)

Note: The Utilities Commission of the NT data on prices is provided in graph form but does not stipulate the exact price per kWh for each state/territory (See Appendices for a table of 2017/18 prices nationally, when the NT had the 3rd cheapest electricity (price then was 25.88 cents per kWh).

Table 2: Electricity Consumption by jurisdiction, 2019

NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	Tas	NT	ACT
5800*	4400*	5600*	4600*	7976	8611	6545

**NSW, Vic, Qld, SA extrapolated from graph, TAS, NT and ACT figures specifically supplied by the Utilities Commission of the NT 2020 p. 12 (Figure 9)*

The high expenditure driven by the high consumption levels in the NT is likely due to:

- “the extreme climate in the Territory”
- “the low unit cost of electricity”
- “or both” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p. 12)

Electricity Bill Debt and Disconnections in the NT

Table 3: Average Residential Customer Energy Bill Debt in the NT (90 days or greater)

	2017/18	2018/19
% Residential Customers with Debt	1.7%	0.9%
Average Residential Customer Debt	\$351.87	\$368.81

Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.24

- The percentage of customers in debt has decreased and is low (0.9%) when compared with the NECF jurisdiction average (1.9%); however
- The average level of debt has risen by \$16.94 (4.8%), but is less than half of the average reported by NECF jurisdictions (\$837.54)
- The residential customer debt indicators for the NT provide some encouraging signs (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.24)

Payment Plans and Hardship Program

- The percentage of residential customers in the Territory (2.1%) on a payment plan is higher than NECF jurisdictions (1.8%).
- The Utilities Commission of the NT has suggested that this may indicate that Territory retailers are identifying customers with less serious payment difficulties early”
- While there is a low percentage of residential customers (0.3%) on a hardship program, the Utilities Commission of the NT (2020, p. 26) has highlighted concerns with the average level of debt on entry to the hardship program (\$1445.21 in 2018/19)
- The Commission also highlighted “lack of customer protections in the Territory, such as formal obligations to have dispute resolution procedures in line with best practice and requirements to have an approved hardship policy” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p. vi, 25-26,28)

Disconnections

Table 4: % of residential customers in the NT disconnected for non-payment

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Jacana Energy	3.5%	3.1%	3.5%
Other	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Territory (Total)	3.5%	3.1%	3.5%

Figures obtained from Table 8, Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p. 28

- 3.5 % of residential customers in the NT were disconnected for non-payment in 2018/19
- These rates are concerning, especially given low rates of customers on the hardship program
- The NT rate of 3.5% is extremely high compared with the rate of 1.1% for NECF jurisdictions
- Half of those disconnected had been disconnected more than once in the previous year.
- For more than 75% of customers who had been disconnected - the disconnection lasted at least seven days (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p. 28)

The rate 3.5% of households who experienced a disconnection equates to up to 2975 households (based on around 85,000 households/small businesses in the NT with a standard meter (Jacana Energy Customers) (Jacana Energy 2020, p.4). This figure alone (up to 2975) is a very significant number of vulnerable households across the NT- but when prepayment households who have experienced disconnections are added – it is a concerning situation indeed, as outlined below.

Households who use Pre-payment Meters for Electricity

Issues for Households using Prepaid Meters: A snap shot from Alice Springs Town Camps

A large number of households across the Northern Territory have pre-payment electricity meters installed at their residences. These take the form of the fairly recently rolled out 'Urban e-token meters' and 'Remote e-token smart meters'; and the 'Ampy wide and narrow mouth meters' but wide mouth meters are currently being phased out (Power and Water 2020).

Jacana Energy provides data to the Utilities Commission of the NT (cited in Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2019a, p. 15) about the number of pre-paid meters, self-disconnects and the average duration of these disconnects. 'Self-disconnection' refers to "an interruption to the supply of energy because a prepayment meter system has no credit (including emergency credit) available (AEMC 2019, p.111).

NTCOSS prefers to use the term **"involuntary 'self-disconnection'"** to emphasise that the household has not chosen to cease their electricity supply voluntarily, and that this is different to 'self-rationing', for example if someone chooses not to top up their electricity if they are going away.

"Involuntary 'Self-disconnect'" Data by Regional Location in the NT 2018/19

Involuntary 'self-disconnect' data by regional location for July 2018 to June 2019 financial year;

- 2374 Territory households had prepayment meters - being located in Town Camps/urban public housing or NGO managed/owned housing
- Of these 2374 dwellings, 1480 (62%) had at least one **"involuntary 'self-disconnection'" event**
- The average duration for each disconnection event was 462 minutes (7.7 hours)
- In Alice Springs the figure was as high as 74%, and in Darwin 72%, while in Tennant Creek it was 62% and Katherine 50% (Jacana Energy data, cited in Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation, 2019a, p.15).

The number of involuntary 'self-disconnections' is a significant concern – but could be even more concerning as these figures don't identify how many households have experienced multiple disconnections. Further to the above data, however, Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation has recently publicised new information highlighting nine months' worth of disconnections data in 2019/20 for one particular Town Camp (all houses). This shows an **average rate of 51 "involuntary 'self-disconnections'" per house over the full year** (Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2020, p. 12) and raises the need for urgent attention to address such an alarming rate. They have also urged action to enable direct deductions from Centrelink payments, which is currently not possible for prepayment customers (Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2020, p.13).

Involuntary 'self-disconnections' are not just inconvenient, they are also costly

- The lack of a continuous electricity supply can impact on a large number of vital household activities – such as heating and cooling a house, storing food, cooking food, washing clothes, and charging electrical equipment such as mobile phones and computers; and can impact on the ability of students to complete study requirements, or for household members to communicate with the outside world and fully engage in society.

- Given the average duration of involuntary 'self-disconnections' in NT urban areas for Urban e-token households is 7.7 hours (Jacana Energy data cited in Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2019a, p. 15), which will mean refrigerated food would go off in this time (particularly in the summer heat) and have to be discarded and replaced at further cost to the household (or people may have to go without). Either way, it further entrenches poverty and disadvantage and contributes to ill-health and associated costs in the long term.

A related matter is that many remote and town camp households experience low incomes, with the reality being that not every household can afford a fridge. Those households that may have a fridge may have had to rely on cheaper (second hand) whitegoods which have low energy efficiency ratings and are more expensive to run and would add to household electricity costs.

For the many households in the NT – in remote areas, Town Camps, and for some urban public and social housing tenants, who use a prepayment electricity system, expenditure can be a weekly item (or sometimes even more frequent) given the need to continually top up, to try to maintain a constant supply of electricity. This makes obtaining access for topping up electricity absolutely crucial.

Accessibility to Credit Top Up for Pre-payment Electricity

There are currently limited options available for households who use a form of prepayment electricity

- Prepayment customers must purchase face to face from a store
- Phone and online purchase options are not yet available.
- Jacana Energy has also indicated that the Basics Card is not likely to be accepted for online and phone purchases of power credit (Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2019b)
- None of the major supermarkets sell prepayment credit (Jacana Energy 2020)

Daily Limit on Epay for suppliers of Prepaid Electricity for Urban-E-Token Meters

- Retail outlets have a pre-set financial limit on the level of all Epay payments that they can process in a day (and not only the Jacana Energy prepaid electricity credit).
- Sometimes an outlet or outlets run out, which necessitates further travel (not to mention the inconvenience) to find an outlet that has prepayment credit top up available.
- NTCOSS assumes that this may also be an issue in remote areas for households who use 'Remote e-token smart meters'

Impact of Transport Challenges on Accessing Credit Top Up

- The purchase of prepayment credit requires travel to a retail outlet
- Access to a private vehicle is a real issue for many households reliant on prepayment meters
- Motor vehicle access for Alice Springs Town Camp residents is very low (according to Baker Heart and Diabetes and TCAC research it sits at around 25% on the Town Camps).
- Town Camp residents need to travel some distance to retailers selling prepayment credit
(Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2019, p.18-19)

Remote areas and Electricity Disconnections

On top of the 2374 houses in Town Camps/urban public housing or NGO managed/owned residential dwellings that have pre-payment meters, there are an additional 4776 dwellings in remote communities which are all part of the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) footprint communities, (Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2020, p. 19-21) (see also Appendices).

NTCOSS can reasonably assume that each of these 4776 dwellings has prepayment electricity of one form or another. All of these dwellings have power supplied by the Indigenous Essential Services which are part of the group of unregulated smaller electricity networks across the NT (Power and Water Corporation 2020). These households would face similar issues to the 2374 households mentioned previously where 62% of households had experienced an 'involuntary' self-disconnection in the 2018/19 financial year.

If 62% of these additional 4776 households also experienced at least one involuntary 'self-disconnection' in a 12-month period, this would equate to a further 2959 households.

When added to the 1480 houses on prepayment meters in urban areas, it means that over 4400 households using prepayment meters experience vulnerability in relation to their electricity connection. This represents a greater number of households with prepayment meters experiencing disconnections at least once a year compared with households with a standard meter (up to 2975). The needs of both household groups need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In addition, it could be argued that all households that have a prepayment meter face energy vulnerability, given that it is possible for a particular store to reach its epay limit for the day, and no matter what planning a household may do to have finance available to purchase an electricity credit top up – if a store cannot supply the top up, they may face an “involuntary 'self-disconnection'”.

In some areas there may be only a very small number of providers, so there may not be other options if a retail outlet(s) has reached its daily epay limit, or a lack of transport may create a further barrier to accessing top up credit. NTCOSS advocates for this issue of limits for epay payments to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

From 1 July 2019 Jacana Energy has implemented a significantly improved Hardship Policy and DV policy, and in March 2020, introduced measures to support customers affected by COVID-19.

JE has advised that it is aware of the issues related to accessibility of top up options for pre-paid electricity meters and is working to overcome the problems / limitations.

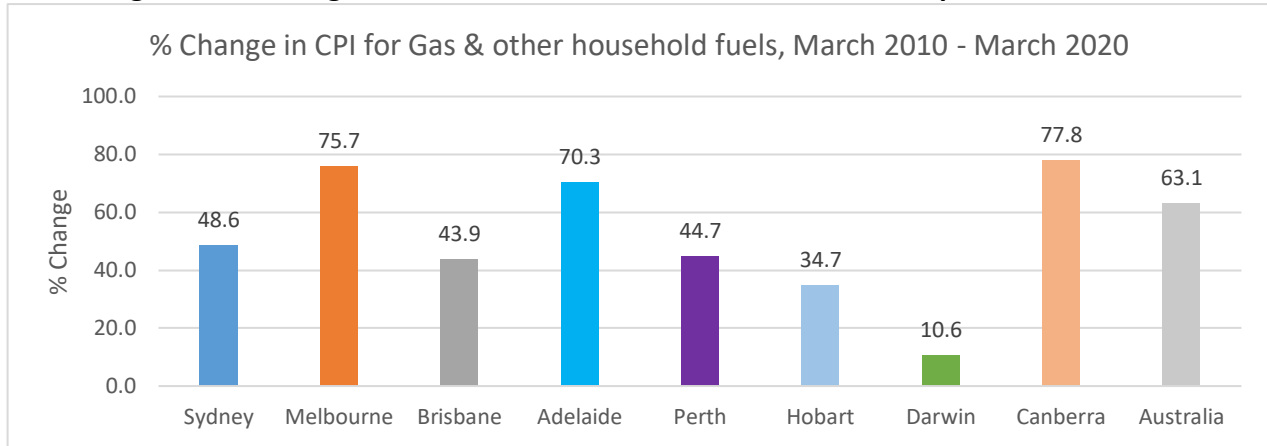
NTCOSS continues to work with Jacana Energy to advocate for a fairer / more equitable system.

Gas and other household fuels

CPI Changes for 'Gas and other household fuels', Darwin

Overall CPI for 'Gas and other household fuels' for Darwin increased 10.6%, the lowest rise out of all capital cities as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: % Change in CPI for Gas and other household fuels Capital Cities 2010 - 2020

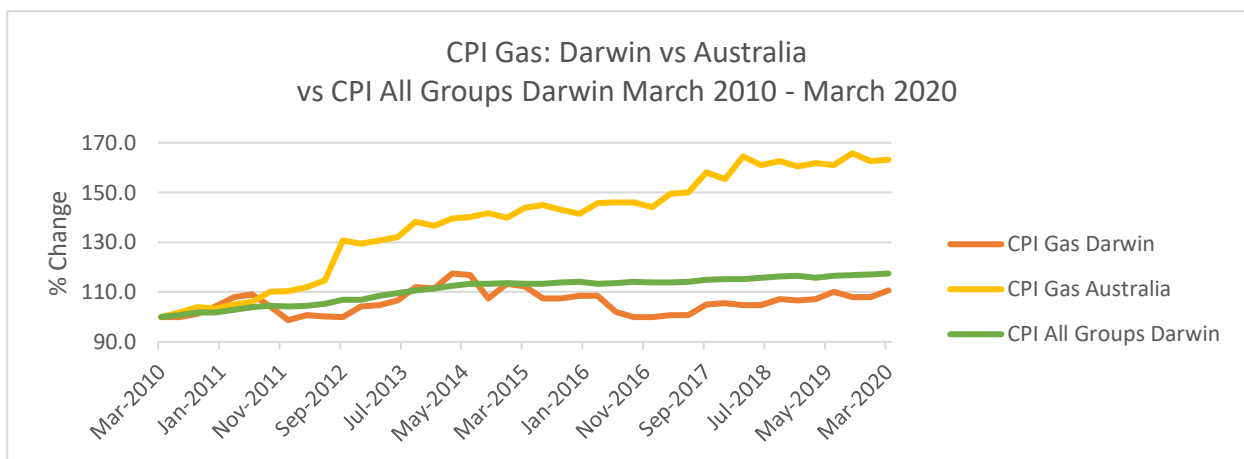


ABS 2020a, Data 1-6

- The CPI for 'Gas' in Darwin over the past decade has risen at a very slow rate of 10.6%, the lowest rise in the country and well below the average rise nationally of 63.1%
- The CPI for 'Gas' has generally hovered around the generic 'All groups CPI', though over the last four years it has been consistently lower than the All Groups CPI (ABS 2020a)

While expenditure on gas in Darwin is relatively low compared to expenditure on electricity, the low rate of growth is still welcome news for households

Figure 4: % Change over time, CPI for Gas and other household fuels Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 4-6

Average expenditure on gas by households in the NT is extremely low. In 2015/16 expenditure on Gas, heating oil and wood was the lowest in the country at \$2.41 per week, compared with the national average of \$10.39 (ABS 2017, Table 13.9A). Given this it makes more sense to look at a combined figure for electricity and gas, given (as noted above) that some states are more reliant on gas than others so it provides a picture of overall domestic fuel and power cost.

**National Comparison of Combined Data on Electricity & Gas and other household fuels:
Regional population of the NT (excluding remote and very remote communities)**

The ABS Household Expenditure Survey (HES) provides data for each state/territory for expenditure in specific household areas as well as expenditure as a proportion of household income. The most recent (2017) HES Survey was based on 2015/16 expenditure figures.

Note: A significant limitation of HES data is that “households in collection districts defined as very remote or Indigenous communities” are excluded (ABS 2017, Summary). Across the Australian population these exclusions have only a minor impact on aggregate estimates, but in the NT “such households account for **about 22% of the population**” which excludes a very significant proportion of the NT population (ABS 2017, Summary). With incomes in remote communities on average very low and the price of items like food more expensive, it means NT wide ABS HES figures do not include data that assist in understanding affordability issues for remote areas.

NTCOSS urges the Federal Government to commit more resources to the HES data collection process to cover very remote areas.

The HES data for combined electricity and gas and other household fuels allows for a like for like comparison (where gas usage may be more prevalent in some jurisdictions)

- The NT had the **highest household expenditure** on Electricity’ and ‘Gas, heating oil and wood’
- The NT ranked **4th lowest** in terms of **expenditure as a proportion of disposable income** - due to the higher average household disposable incomes in the NT
- From these indicators, electricity and gas expenditure could appear to be relatively affordable for the average household in the NT (noting that these figures exclude remote and very remote Aboriginal communities) (ABS 2017, 13.8, 13.9)

2017 Household Expenditure Survey Data – Expenditure as a proportion of income

Data from the 2017 Household Expenditure Survey (which related to the 2015/16 period) is the most recently available data that allows for a comparison of jurisdictions in relation to proportion of income spent on electricity and gas combined. While 2015/16 is some years away now, the proportion of income is the focus here (as opposed to expenditure in 2015/16).

Table 5: Data Weekly Electricity & Gas* Expenditure as % of Mean Disposable Income 2015/16

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Electricity & Gas*	2.1%	2.7%	2.1%	3.0%	2.2%	3.2%	2.3%	2.4%	2.4%

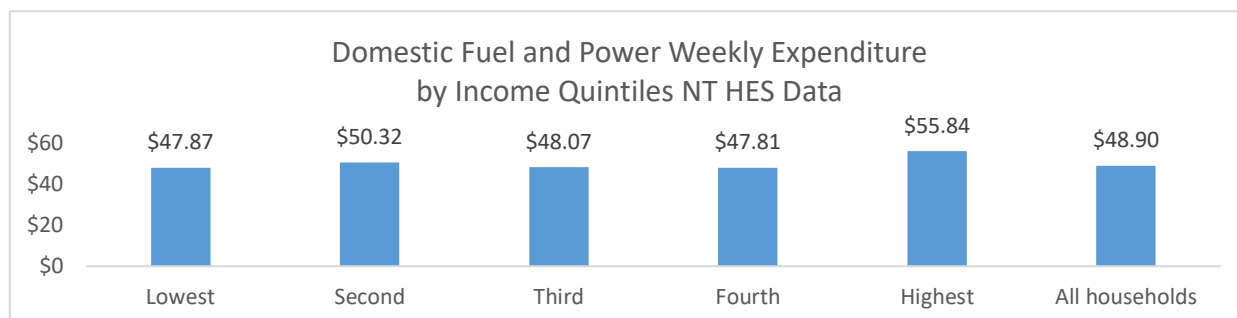
*ABS 2017, Table 13.8, 13.9A. *Gas refers to Gas and other household fuels*

- While the above information may appear to represent positive news for many households in the NT, averages can mask what is happening for specific population groups.
- It is critical therefore to examine what is happening for low income groups and particular household types who might be vulnerable.

Expenditure on Domestic Fuel and Power: Low Income Households (excludes remote communities)

The following figures show household expenditure for combined 'Domestic Fuel and Power'

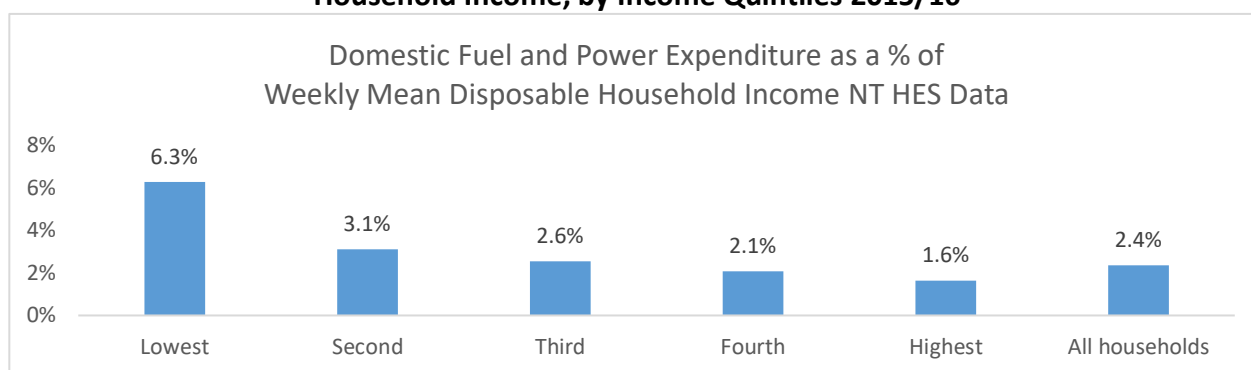
Figure 5: NT Weekly Expenditure: Domestic Fuel and Power by Income Quintiles, 2015/16



ABS 2017, Table 20.1 ('Domestic fuel and power' includes 'Electricity', 'Gas, heating, oil and wood')

Note: The Expend figures have not been indexed to reflect 2020 expenditure figures as the focus is on the % of household expenditure.

Figure 6: Weekly Expenditure on Domestic Fuel and Power as a % of Mean Weekly Disposable Household Income, by Income Quintiles 2015/16



ABS 2017, Table 20.1, 20.2

Lowest income households in the NT spend the least amount of money weekly on 'Domestic fuel and power', but they spend a much greater proportion of their income (6.3%) than the average NT households' (2.4%) and a higher proportion than each of the other income groups, including nearly four times the proportion of income used by the highest income households (1.6%) (ABS 2017). (This is relatively consistent with the figure from the Utilities Commission of the NT regarding the 8.8% of disposable income spent on electricity by low-income households).

NTCOSS 2019 (p.18-19) also highlighted that the following household types in the NT also pay a greater proportion of their income than the NT 'all households' average (2.4%)

- Lone person households for persons 65+ (3.2%)
- Lone person households for persons under 35+ (3.4%)
- Couples with dependent children only, with a youngest child aged under 5 (2.5%)
- Couples with dependent children only, with a youngest child aged 5 to 14 (2.6%)
- One parent family with dependent children (2.7%)
- Couple only Reference person aged 65 and over (2.7%) (ABS 2017, Tables 20.7, 20.8)

While NT figures are not available, national figures also reveal that

- Public Housing Renters (4.6%) also spend a high proportion of their weekly income on 'Domestic fuel and power' (ABS 2017, Tables 8.1, 8.2).

National Comparison – Capital Cities: Water Prices

Figure 7 shows a comparison of water prices per KL across all capital cities in 2019/20. These figures reveal that Darwin has the 2nd lowest KiloLitre charge of all capital cities (\$1.96) out of all capital cities (Team Poly Water Solutions for Life, 2020).

The figures below reflect the cents per KiloLitre charges for households – but don't include fixed daily rate charges. Given that for most households, it is the cents per KiloLitre charge that contributes to the majority of the bill, the figures below provide a useful basis for comparison between jurisdictions.

Figure 7: Capital Cities Water Prices \$ per KiloLitre Charges 2019/20

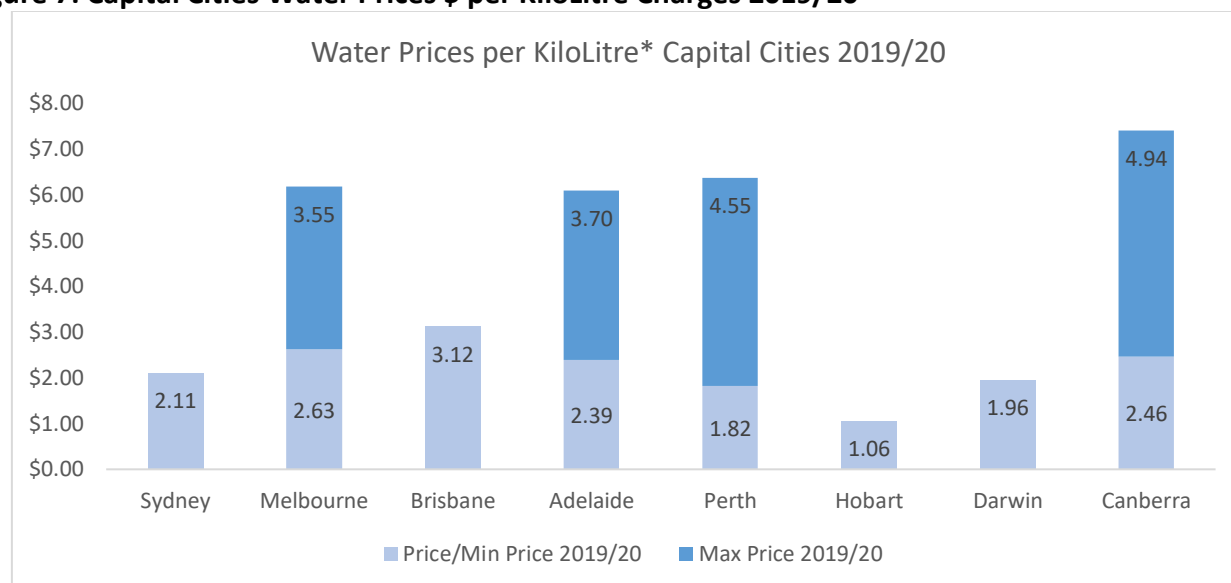


Figure derived from figures from Team Poly Water Solutions for Life, 2020

Note: These figures do not factor in the fixed daily charge

National Comparison – Capital Cities: Household Expenditure on Water

The following Table provides a national comparison of expenditure across all capital cities (bar Hobart) in recent years (ABS 2019), which shows:

- Households in Darwin have had the highest expenditure on water in the country for a number of years now, despite the relatively low tariff rate (note figures up to 2017/18)

Table 6: Major Urban Centres Water Residential Bill Typical Water Supply and Sewerage Expenditure 2013/14-2107/18 (Note Hobart figures not included)

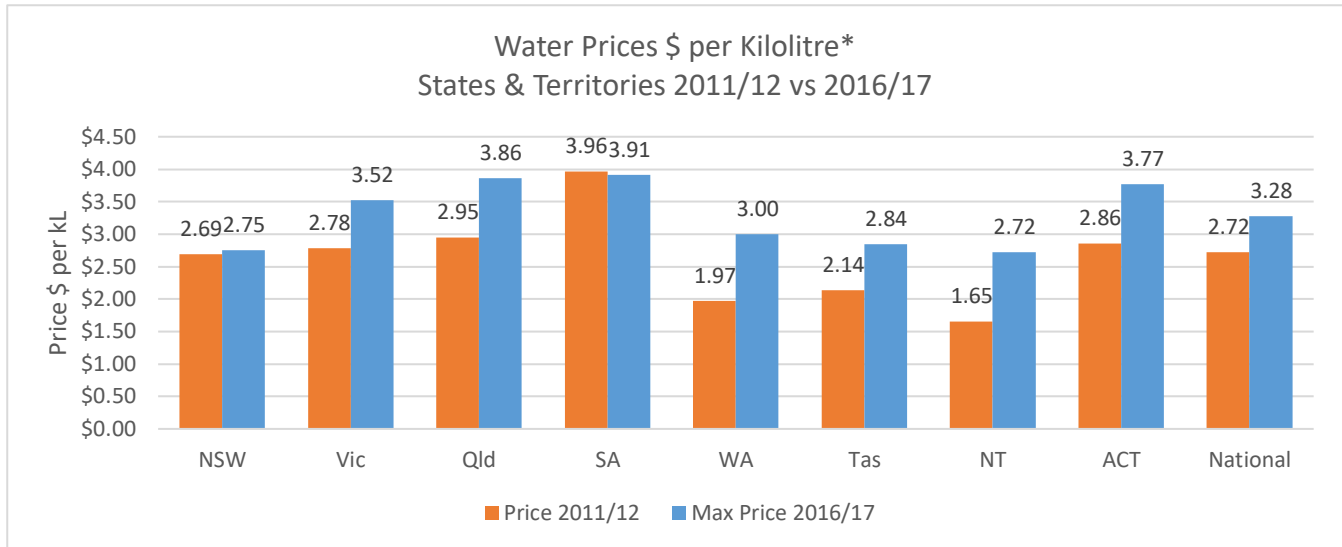
State/Terr	Syd	Melb	SE Qld	Adel	Perth	Darwin	Canb
2013-14	\$1,221	\$1,164	\$1,368	\$1,371	\$1,376	\$1,908	\$1,175
2014-15	\$1,215	\$1,029	\$1,444	\$1,393	\$1,404	\$1,967	\$1,153
2015-16	\$1,212	\$1,065	\$1,437	\$1,420	\$1,420	\$1,951	\$1,175
2016-17	\$1,106	\$1,023	\$1,413	\$1,188	\$1,435	\$1,831	\$1,158
2017-18	\$1,127	\$1,016	\$1,401	\$1,271	\$1,465	\$1,820	\$1,169

Team Poly Water Solutions for Life, 2020

National Comparison – States and Territories: Household Expenditure on Water

A comparison of state and territories shows that the **NT as a whole has the lowest tariff rate***, of \$2.72 per kWh – looking at the overall price of water consumed per household (not simply the per kL charge. For example, the above figure for the NT of \$2.72 per kL reflects the variable charge of \$1.96 per kL and the fixed daily rate of \$0.8190 per day (which is charged irrespective of consumption levels)
Note: In the comparison of the kL charges for capital cities (Figure 7) prices reflect per kL charges only.

Figure 8: Water Prices per Kilolitre, States and Territories, Comparison over time

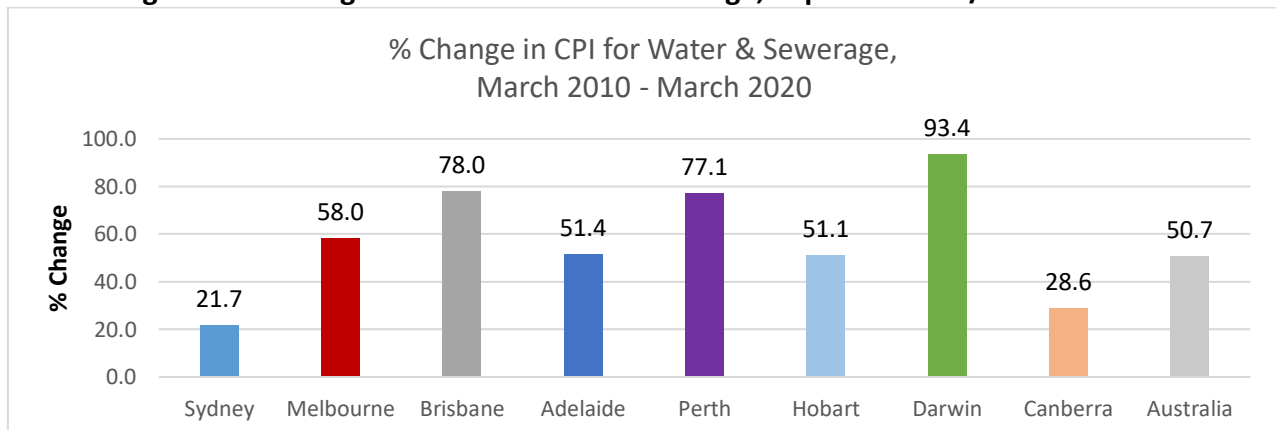


ABS 2013; ABS 2019

National Comparison – Capital Cities: CPI changes for 'Water and sewerage'

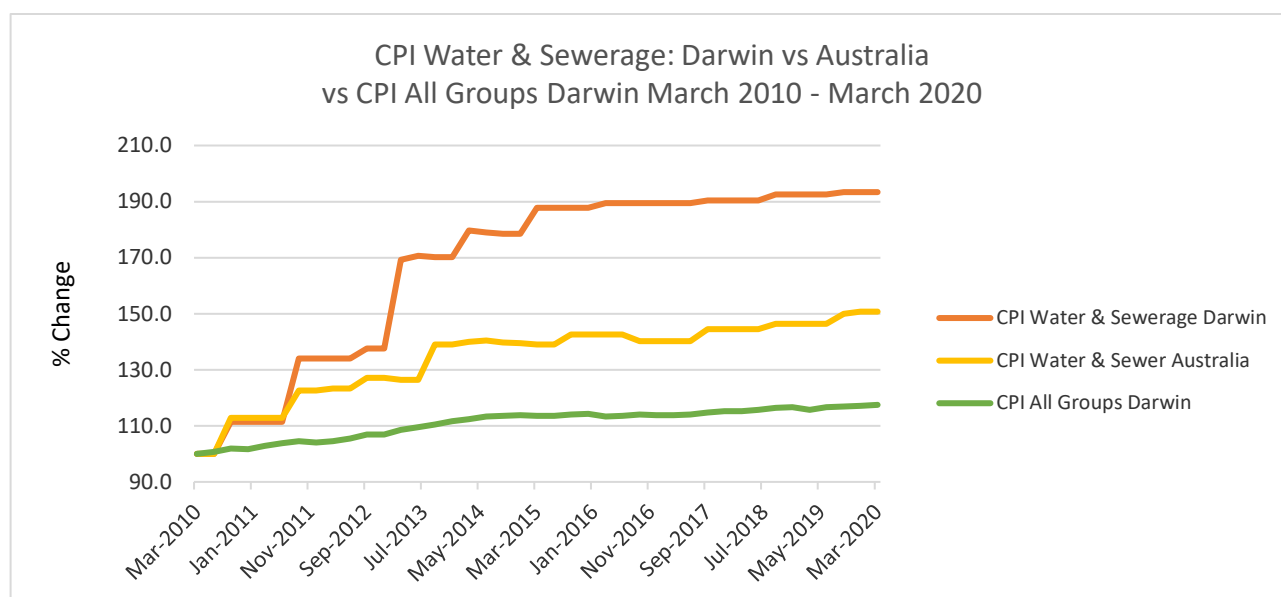
- The CPI for 'Water' and sewerage for Darwin rose dramatically over the first five years of the past decade (ABS 2020a), which would have led to higher bills for households across the NT (given that the same rate of 'Water and sewerage' charges apply across the NT) (ABS 2020a)
- Overall, over the past decade, the CPI for 'Water and Sewerage' in Darwin rose 93.4% over the past decade, the largest increase in the country for capital cities, and **nearly double** the national average increase (ABS 2020a).

Figure 9: % Change in CPI for Water & Sewerage, Capital Cities b/w 2010 - 2020



Source: ABS 2020a, Data 1-6

Figure 10: % Change over time, CPI for Water & Sewerage for Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2010



Source: ABS 2020a, Data 4-6

- Figure 9 and 10 show that the CPI for 'Water and sewerage' rose at a rate (93.4% over **five times** the rate of the Darwin 'All groups' CPI (17.5%) over the past decade (ABS 2020a).

As well as examining price and price movement and expenditure, in terms of assessing affordability, it is also important to examine expenditure as a proportion of household income.

As a proportion of disposable income, expenditure by NT households, compared with the other jurisdictions, shows that:

- The NT ranks **equal 3rd lowest in weekly expenditure on 'Water and sewerage rates and charges'**— and on par with the national average (ABS 2017).

Table 7: National Comparison: Weekly Water and Sewerage expenditure as % of Mean Disposable Income in States/Territories 2015/16

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Water & Sewerage	0.7%	1.0%	0.6%	1.1%	0.9%	0.9%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%

ABS 2017, Table 13.8, 13.9A

These figures suggest that for the average household in the NT expenditure on water and sewerage is relatively affordable, based on average household incomes. This is likely to still be the case, given that there has been a plateauing in the CPI for Water and Sewerage over the past five years.

In addition, it is important to again note that the ABS HES figures do not include remote and Indigenous communities which constitute 22% of the overall NT population (ABS 2017, Introduction)

While these averages do not take into account different household types, bills for water and sewerage must be seen in a different light to electricity, because many low-income households are rental households – where generally they are not required to pay for water and sewerage charges.

There will no doubt be some low-income households who have a mortgage or own their own home (and therefore receive a water and sewerage bill) who struggle to manage their water and sewerage bill. Many of these households will be eligible for water and sewerage concessions, which will go some way to assist these households in managing cost of living pressures.

National Comparison: Combined Utilities Expenditure as a Proportion of Income

- ABS data shows that NT households on average spend the most on utilities per week compared to the other jurisdictions – more than \$500 per year above the national average (ABS 2017, 13.9A).

Examination of expenditure as a proportion of disposable income, however, shows that:

- The NT ranks equal 3rd lowest expenditure on utilities overall
- This is due to the overall higher average disposable income (which was the highest in the country and approximately \$300 per week above the national average, according to the last HES Survey (ABS 2017, 13.8).

Table 8: Weekly Utilities Expenditure as % of Mean Disposable Income, State & Territories 2015/16

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Utilities Total Exp	2.8%	3.7%	2.7%	4.1%	3.1%	4.1%	3.1%	3.2%	3.2%

ABS 2017, Table 13.8, 13.9A

Utilities and Concessions

“Energy concessions are delivered to address access to energy for people on low-incomes, people relying on medical equipment and people who have additional energy needs due to thermo regulatory illness” and are “a significant arm of the consumer protections in Australia’s domestic energy markets” (ACOSS 2014, p.11). The NT Government through its NT Concession Scheme provides electricity, water (both now capped at \$1200 and \$800 per annum respectively) and sewerage concessions to a large number of Territory households (NT Government 2020a).

NTCOSS’ did an analysis of the impact of utilities concessions over time in its December 2019 Cost of Living Report, which showed that the electricity concession has been more than adequately keeping up with cost of living rises (looking at the period 2014-2019). Concessions for water and sewerage had not quite kept up with cost of living rises , but for those households who receive concessions for both electricity, as well as water and sewerage, the combined concessions received have kept up with utilities cost of living rises (NTCOSS 2019, p.26-27). While this provides some positive news for current NT recipients, NTCOSS is concerned that some vulnerable households are missing out on concessions.

Who is missing out on Electricity Concessions?

Due to tight eligibility criteria, many low-income Territorians are not eligible for utilities concessions. With the change to eligibility to the NT Concession Scheme (effective 17 November 2017), new applicants from groups previously eligible for the NT Pensioner and Carers Concession Scheme (NTPCCS) are no longer eligible – e.g. Low-Income Health Care Card Holders and recipients of Carer Allowance. Existing members of the NTPCCS from these groups (as at 17 November 2017), however, remained on the scheme - i.e. they were ‘grandfathered’ into the then new NT Concession Scheme.

In addition, recipients of JobSeeker Payment (formerly known as Newstart) and Youth Allowance are not eligible for any of the concessions – even though their incomes are substantially lower than many of the existing eligible recipients. This represents an inequitable approach to utilities concessions and needs to be addressed as a matter of priority. In addition, we know from previous NTCOSS Cost of Living reports that the rates of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance generally have not keep up with overall cost of living increases (NTCOSS 2019, p. 12).

Given the high costs of living in the NT, particularly remote NT, it is imperative that concessions reach all those who are eligible. It is a real concern that utilities costs lead to further living cost pressures for people who can least afford it, and who are often receiving smaller incomes than people who are eligible for the NT Concession Scheme, with the JobSeeker Payment more than \$180 per week lower than the pension rate currently (NTCOSS 2020a, p. 17).

NTCOSS therefore again calls for electricity concessions to be extended to all Centrelink Health Care Card holders, and other low-income groups currently missing out. NTCOSS believes that this would very much fit with the structure of the NT Concession Scheme as a means-tested scheme “to provide assistance and support with the cost of living” (NT Government 2020a) and would align the NT with

the other states and the ACT, where, electricity concessions are made available to all Health Care Card holders. Improving access to concessions would reduce electricity costs for lower income households.

NTCOSS also believes the NT Government should invest resources into relevant agencies (social services, Jacana Energy, Government agencies) for data collection about the rate of access to energy vouchers (emergency relief) for groups ineligible for the NT electricity concessions (e.g. JobSeeker recipients, to help build the picture of the impact on households who do not receive concessions).

NT Concession Scheme Recipients who have Photovoltaic (PV) Solar Systems

Some NT Concession Scheme recipients have Photovoltaic Solar (PV) systems and participate in the renewable energy buy back scheme. Where this is the case, solar credits from PV Solar Systems are applied to the member's bill before the concessions are applied. If the member's solar panel system generates enough electricity to cover consumption and a credit is applied to the bill, no concessions will be applied to their account. If, however, the buyback amount is greater than the combined fixed daily charges and consumption charges for the quarter, the electricity concession is applied to the difference, but is effectively capped, so that the charges incurred by the household are zero for that quarter. The concession system has the flexibility to kick in and out, depending on household quarterly consumption levels.

This issue further highlights that it could be very advantageous for both the NT Government and eligible NT Concession Scheme recipients, to encourage Solar PV installation for low income households. Investment by Government in this area would ensure that many households would have negligible or no electricity bills, and the government would make significant savings on its concessions budget – thus freeing up funding for other services for low-income and senior Territorians.

Another issue of importance is in relation to energy saving schemes, which have not always been accessible to low income Territory households, as they have generally not had the financial means to take advantage of them. This makes it very hard for low income households to improve their energy efficiency, which often leads to reliance on older and inefficient appliances, which are often subject to poor maintenance regimes. In addition, renters in older housing can face poor thermal efficiency, and there is little incentive for landlords to make energy efficiency related improvements.

An issue of critical importance that the Utilities Commission of the NT (2020, p.13) has highlighted is that while the NT Government “is seeking to protect customers from having to pay for the high cost of supplying electricity in the Territory, regulating electricity prices may be negating efficient market outcomes by distorting price signals, discouraging energy efficiency and contributing to higher overall costs”.

While there have been efforts made through programs nationally which are directly working with low income households to address energy efficiency issues – including the Low Income Energy Efficiency Program (LEEIP) in East Arnhem Land further developments are urgently required. This is why NTCOSS is calling for the implementation of a comprehensive NT Energy Efficiency Strategy.

2. Food

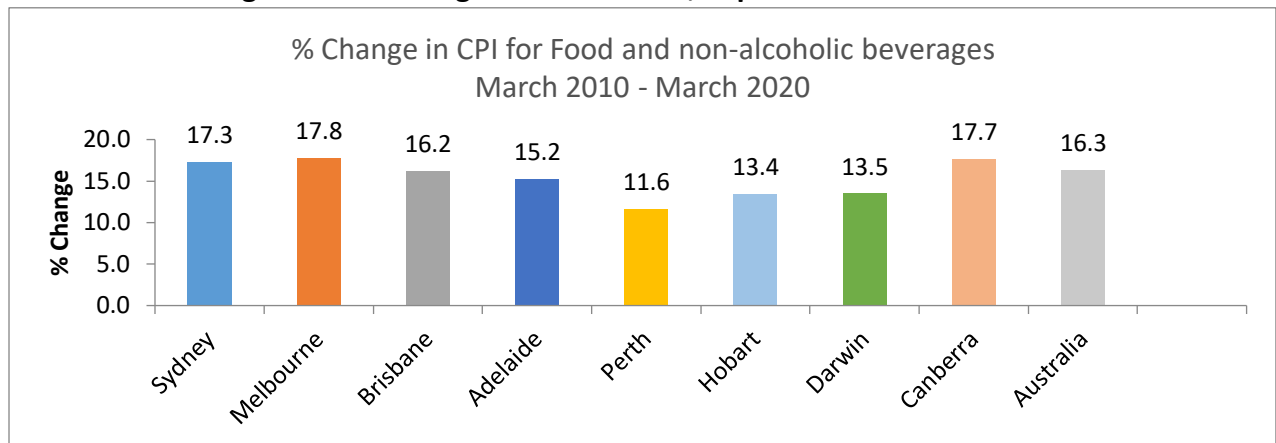
The price of food is a significant issue to examine in terms of its impact on NT household budgets, with food taking up the second largest slice of weekly household expenditure (behind housing) (ABS, 2017). In addition, food is a non-discretionary essential expenditure area for all households with nutritious food essential to the health and wellbeing of all Territorians.

National Comparison – Capital Cities: CPI changes for ‘Food and non-alcoholic beverages’

Figure 11 highlights that:

- The CPI for food in Darwin rose 13.5% over the past decade, the third lowest increase in the country for capital cities, and below the national rise (16.3%),
- When compared with generic ‘All groups’ CPI for Darwin, the CPI for food rose at a rate under the rate of the Darwin CPI (17.5%) over the past decade (ABS 2020a).

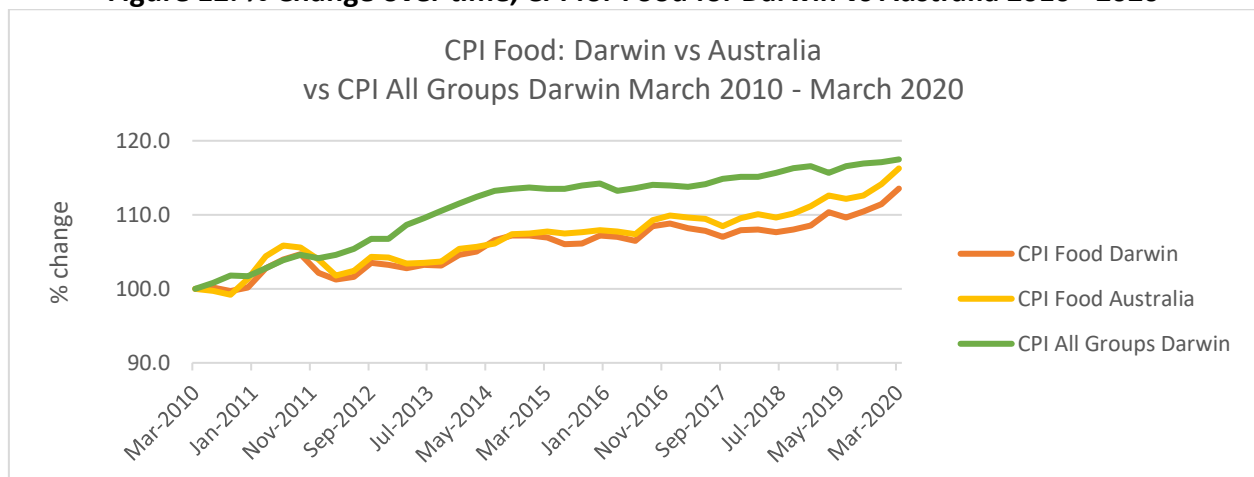
Figure 11: % Change in CPI for Food, Capital Cities 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 1-6

- While the CPI for food for Darwin has risen under the rate of the generic CPI for Darwin, as well as under the national CPI for food over the past decade (ABS 2020a), which represents good news for Darwin households, the change in price of food in Darwin is not necessarily indicative of changes in food prices across the rest of the NT.

Figure 12: % Change over time, CPI for Food for Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 4- 6

Remote Food Prices – Comparison between Major Centres and Remote Areas

As CPI figures only reflect prices across capital cities, an examination of the NT Government's Market Basket Surveys provides very important data to analyse trends. The significant variations in food prices across different regions of the NT is well documented. Prices in remote communities have been alarmingly and consistently higher than the prices at district supermarkets in major centre; and to a lesser (but still significant extent) higher in corner stores as well – as reflected in Figure 13 below.

NTCOSS acknowledges that there are a number of reasons why prices are so high in remote areas. Most remote stores operate in a monopoly environment as the sole provider of food (as well as other consumer goods) to communities (House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee, 2009, p.6).

Other factors that add to the overall costs of providing food in remote areas is distance from suppliers and major service centres and the resulting cost of freight and the conditions of roads in the NT Territory as well as the transport challenges that result in areas that may be cut off during the wet season. In addition, remote stores do not have the same buying power of larger supermarkets, not having the same economies of scale.

NTCOSS (2020b, p.8) in its submission to the Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities highlighted that "Freight subsidies may assist in reducing the cost of food for people in remote communities", but that there is evidence cautioning "that these subsidies can become absorbed by the market" and "that freight subsidies should be applied at the consumer level, with additional oversight of pricing and charges to safeguard against profiteering" (House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee, 2009, p. 85).

As NTCOSS (2020b, p.3) also highlighted location is also a key factor "with larger supermarkets able to supply a full range of food and groceries at competitive prices, while "small 'corner stores' (small suburban supermarkets) are often characterised by higher, average prices, and do not provide the same range of foods. Proximity to corner stores makes them a more viable option for many low income households, for example in Alice Springs, corner stores are often closer and more convenient for residents of Town Camps where access to a private vehicle may be limited, and distance from public bus stops (and limited public bus coverage on weekends) being another prohibitive factor.

While NTCOSS heavily relies on the data that comes out of the NT Government's Market Basket Surveys, done by the Department of Health there are some limitations to the data – which the Department of Health openly acknowledges (see Appendices).

NTCOSS also notes that the Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) raised a number of concerns in relation to the most recent 2019 Report – in particular they identified a large number of "pricing mistakes across the 12 surveys completed in ALPA operated stores" which they argue "increased the healthy basket cost by an average of 5.4% . ALPA is concerned that such errors may also have "existed across the 58 MBS surveys that were collected in 2019" (ALPA 2020, p.14).

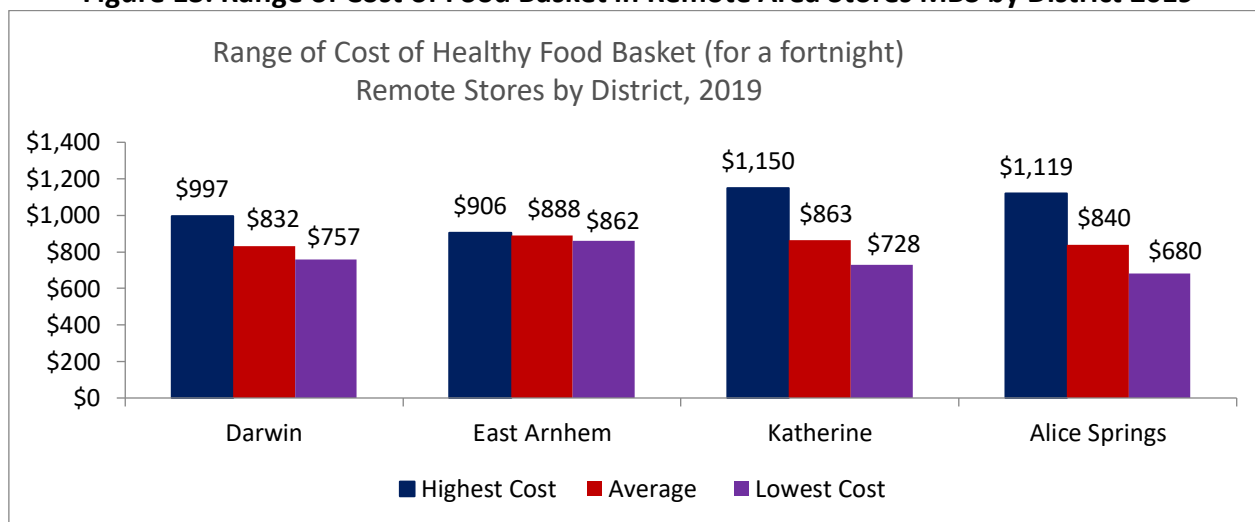
The 2019 Market Basket Survey report did acknowledge concern raised by one store’s management group about “a number of discrepancies in the recorded data compared to what was available through their computer systems... [which] suggest the MBS data could have overestimated the cost of the HFB in their stores by approximately 5% and the CDB [Current Diet Basket] by 3% (NT Government 2020b, p. 21). Possible reasons for the discrepancies were identified as: incorrect recording of price or weight of item by the surveyor; incorrect price on display; and/or incorrect choice of product by the surveyor” (NT Government 2020b, p. 21). The NT Government has made a commitment to investigated methods to reduce any such errors in future surveys (NT Government 2020, p.20-21).

Related to this NTCOSS notes ALPA’s (2020, p.15) call “for a national price monitoring tool, that is validated, accurate, and remains anonymous to allow increased participation [of stores]”. ALPA also suggest instead of comparing remote store prices with major supermarkets, who have significant buying power, a fairer and more realistic comparison would be between “remote community stores and urban corner stores, who possess similar buying powers” and that remote stores are doing a “pretty good job” on this basis with prices only 6% higher than corner stores (ALPA 2020. p.15).

NTCOSS believes that these are valid points and while this cost of living report does contrast the average cost of a healthy food basket in remote stores with major supermarkets, this is important from one perspective as it highlights just how expensive food is in remote communities. In addition, comparing major supermarkets and remote stores also helps to highlight the growing gap between the costs in each type of store – which highlights the high growth rate in the cost of food in remote stores over the years (while supermarket costs have in fact decreased over the past decade (see Figure 14 below). Such issues are important to highlight in working for change.

Even allowing for the discrepancies noted above by ALPA – there would still be a substantial price difference between remote stores and major supermarkets (even if not as high as 56%), which requires urgent attention.

Figure 13: Range of Cost of Food Basket in Remote Area Stores MBS by District 2019



NT Government 2020b, p.9

It is particularly useful to consider price changes in relation to food over the past decade, given the number of initiatives that have been introduced to improve access to food in remote communities in the NT (e.g. introduction of Outback Stores, remote store licensing – see Appendices). Over the past decade, prices in remote communities and corner stores have risen at a much higher rate than prices in the district supermarkets in major centres. This is of particular concern.

In 2019, the price of the Healthy Food Basket (for a fortnight) in a remote store was as high as \$1150 (Katherine region) and as low as \$680 (Alice Springs region). There are also some perplexing differences in costs between remote stores within the same region, e.g. in the Alice Springs region the price ranged from \$680 - \$1119; while in Katherine the range was \$728-\$1150 (NT Government 2020, p.9). NTCOSS concedes that some of the price differences could be due to the size of the stores and or distance from major centres, but there is insufficient data available to undertake such analysis.

The 2019 MBS Report reveals that over the past decade, on average, the fortnightly cost of the Healthy Food Basket

- In NT Supermarkets has decreased by 1.1% (\$548 down to \$542)
- In NT Remote Store has increased by 22% (\$695 up to \$848)
- In Corner Stores has increased by 18.2% (\$677 up to \$800) despite minimal price movement overall between 2009-2015 (NT Government 2019, p.16; NT Government 2020, p.9)

While the CPI involves a different basket of goods, it is still useful to compare the changes in price for both remote stores and corner stores in comparison with the CPI for food for Darwin. The increase in cost of the HFB in both remote stores and corner stores rose double (or close to) the rate of the Darwin CPI for food and non-alcoholic beverages (11.2%) for the same period (June 2009-June 2019²) (ABS 2020a).

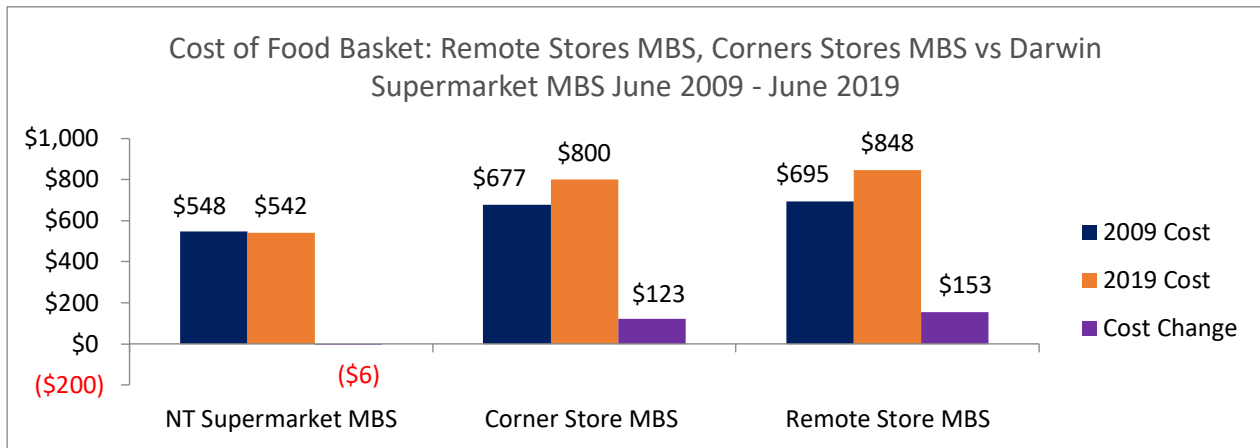
Table 9: Healthy Food Basket: Average Cost (per fortnight) 2019, by region

	Darwin	East Arnhem	Katherine	Alice Springs
Major Supermarkets	\$517	\$552	\$569	\$530
NT Remote Stores	\$832	\$888	\$863	\$840
Corner Stores	\$757	N/A	\$907	\$736

NT Government 2019c, p. 9

² Note the comparison here is with the decade from June 2009 - June 2019, to correlate with the figures available for the MBS, while throughout the rest of the report, the decade comparison for CPI figures relates to June 2010 - June 2020.

Figure 14: Comparison of Change in Cost of the Healthy Food Basket by Store type 2009 - 2019



NT Government 2019, p. 16; NT Government 2020, p. 9.

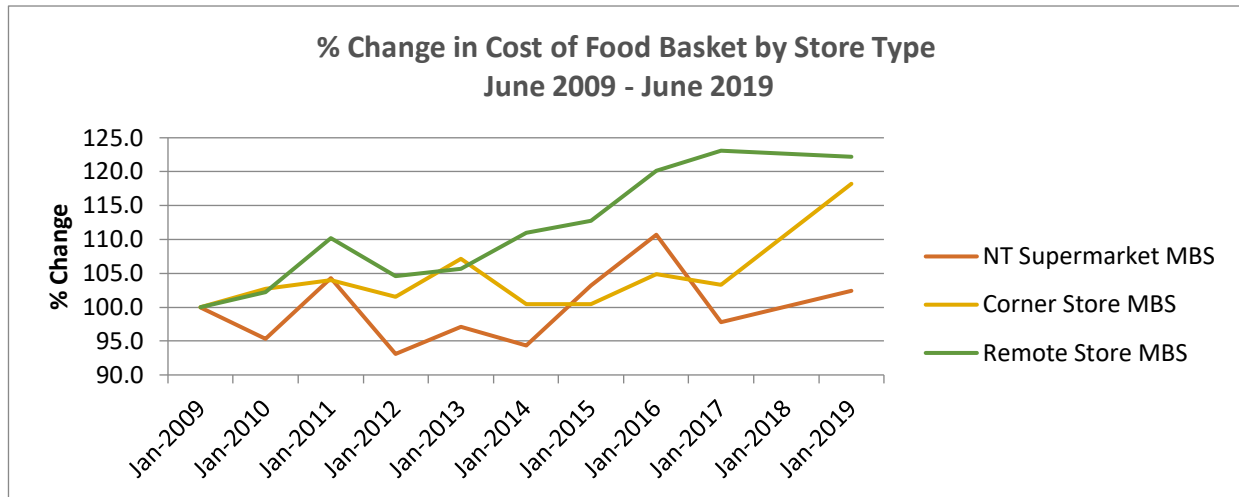
Changes in cost of Healthy Food Basket over time

- In 2009, the cost of a food basket on average in a remote store was 27% higher than the average cost in a NT supermarket (NT Government 2019, p. 17)
- in 2004 and 2008, this difference was as low as 18% (NT Government 2019, p. 17)
- In 2019, however, the food basket on average, cost 56% more in remote stores and 47% more in corner stores in comparison with the NT supermarket average
- While the 56% difference is a slightly improved position on the 2017 MBS (where the difference was 60%), overall things have been going backwards when it comes to bringing the average cost of food down in remote areas over a long period of time
- In some remote stores in the Alice Springs and Katherine regions, some baskets cost between 106% and 112% more than the average cost in a NT supermarket (NT Government 2020b, p. 9)

Figure 15 shows the trends over time in the average price of food in remote stores, corner stores and a NT supermarket over the past decade and reveals that remote food prices have generally been on a steady rise over the past decade apart from in 2012, 2013 and 2019. It is important to note that in 2011 fruit prices were extremely high across the board, due to the high price of bananas, but they then dropped the following year – this accounts for the particular spike in 2012 for both remote stores and NT supermarkets evident in the graph.

The cost of the Healthy Food Basket at Corner Store was relatively stable between 2009 and 2015, but has risen steeply since then – rising by 18.2% over the decade (ending 2019). In comparison the cost of the Healthy Food Basket in NT Remote Stores has risen 22.0%, but by only 1.1 in NT Supermarkets on average (NTCOSS calculations based on NT Government 2019, p.16 and NT Government 2020, p. 9).

Figure 15: % Change over time, Cost of Food Basket (MBS) by Store type June 2009 - June 2019

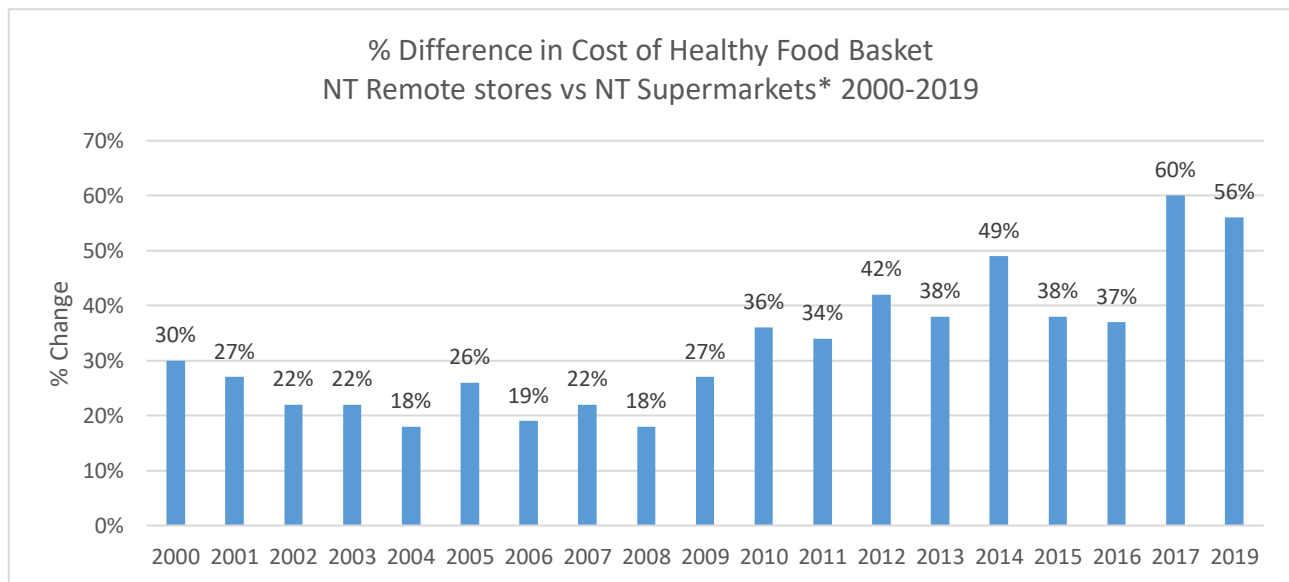


NT Government 2019, p. 16, NT Government 2020, p.9

NOTE: * Barkly district supermarket was not surveyed in 2019; historically the Barkly district supermarket has been more expensive than other district supermarkets (NTG 2020, P.20)

The following figure shows the percentage difference in the cost of the Healthy Food Basket between NT Remote Stores and NT Supermarkets over time.

Figure 16: % difference in Cost of Healthy Food Basket NT Remote Store Average and NT Supermarket Average 2000-2019



Derived from NT Government 2017, p.16; NT Government 2020, p.9

Note: No MBS Report was done in 2018

Price Movement in NT Remote Stores for the major food groups in the Healthy Food Basket

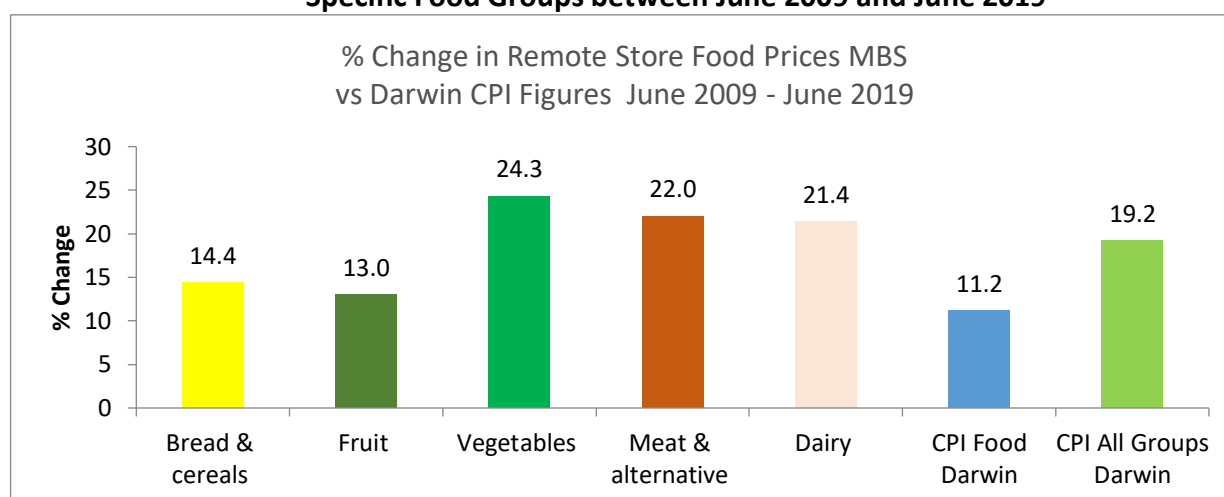
The price of food in remote stores can be further broken down to examine the price movement for the major food group expenditure areas. Figure 17 looks at these and compares these prices with the Darwin Food CPI as well as the generic CPI for Darwin.

While the CPI measures a different basket of goods to the MBS Healthy Food Basket it is still useful to compare price trends of similar items. NTCOSS calculated the percentage change over the past decade for the major food groups in the MBS Healthy Food Basket, and found that:

- All of the major food groups in the Healthy Food Basket rose at a rate above the CPI for the corresponding Darwin CPI group
- For bread and cereals and fruit, the rise was below the generic all groups CPI for Darwin.

It is critical to remember here that remote store prices have been historically so high **that any price increase represents movement in the wrong direction.**

Figure 17: % Change in Remote Store Food Prices (MBS) vs Darwin CPI for Specific Food Groups between June 2009 and June 2019



Derived from NT Government 2019, p. 16, NT Government 2020, p.9; ABS 2020a, Data 4-6

The only acceptable change is lower prices for healthy food groups if we are to make healthy food more affordable and accessible to people in remote areas and to improve health status at a population and individual level.

It is also critical to look at expenditure as a proportion of household income. Given the disparity in prices between remote stores and major supermarkets, remote households pay disproportionately more for their food when shopping locally. Between 2000 and 2015, the MBS provided data on proportion of income spent on a food basket for both a Darwin district supermarket and the average cost at a NT remote store (these figures however were not provided in the 2016, 2017 and 2019 Market Basket Surveys). NTCOSS calculations for the 2019 report (see Appendices) found that the hypothetical household of six (used in the MBS) would on average require 32% of their fortnightly income support payments to purchase the healthy food basket (\$848) at a remote store, while they would only require 20% of their fortnightly income shopping at a Darwin district supermarket (\$517).

The rate of 32% is more than double the national household average of disposable income required for food and non-alcoholic beverage expenditure (13.9%). This figure is cause for alarm (See Appendices re figures between 2000-2015 and 2019). In order to make a real difference to access to fresh fruit and vegetables for residents of remote communities, **one target that could be set by Government is for fresh fruit and vegetables to be available in remote communities at the same price as in a Darwin supermarket.** In the 2012 Market Basket Survey, reference is made to the fact that “Darwin region is where the majority of Territorians live and similar surveys in other states use their capital city supermarket prices as the benchmark” (NT Government 2013, p. 26).

Health Impact of High Food Prices in NT Remote Stores

On top of the impact on cost of living issues, food costs also directly impact on health outcomes for many people. Research from around the world has consistently shown that people on low incomes have a higher rate of ill health than well-off members of society. Jan et al (2012, 29-31) note that chronic illness and disability is associated with economic hardship, which of itself then affects health behaviours “thereby completing a cycle in which poor health leads to poverty, which then leads to poor health”.

There are well established links between a poor diet and chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers (AIHW, 2018). For people with poor health, an inadequate diet can further exacerbate existing health conditions, such as diabetes or kidney disease.

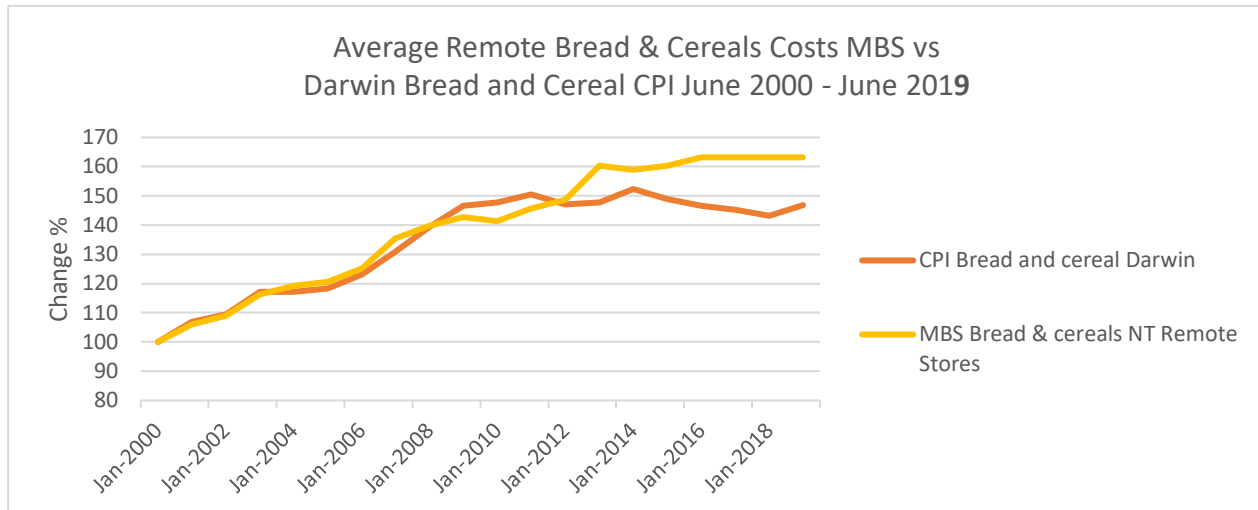
For some people in low income households, skipping meals or regularly going without adequate food might be a choice they make to ensure their children are fed, which may be compromising their required nutritional intake.

Lee & Lewis (2018, p.4) describe that internationally, a benchmark of 30% of income has been used as a cut-off point to indicate affordability of a diet. Spending above this benchmark places many NT households under enormous financial stress – severely depleting the income that is available for other essential items – or causing people to go without sufficient food at times.

Improving the availability, variety, quality and affordability of fruits and vegetables has been a priority identified in both Northern Territory and national nutrition policies, in order to improve the very low (or non-existent) daily intake of fruit and vegetables by Aboriginal people in remote areas (NT Government 2013a, p. 25-26). The 2012 MBS cites strong evidence which suggests that “an adequate intake of fruits and vegetables is protective against diseases such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, stroke and some cancers” (NT Government 2013, p. 25).

In addition, the 2012 MBS refers to national surveys showing that “many Australians do not consume the recommended amounts of fruit and vegetables and the rates of people who are not meeting the recommended daily intake of fruit and vegetables is higher amongst Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people”(NT Government 2013, p. 25-26).

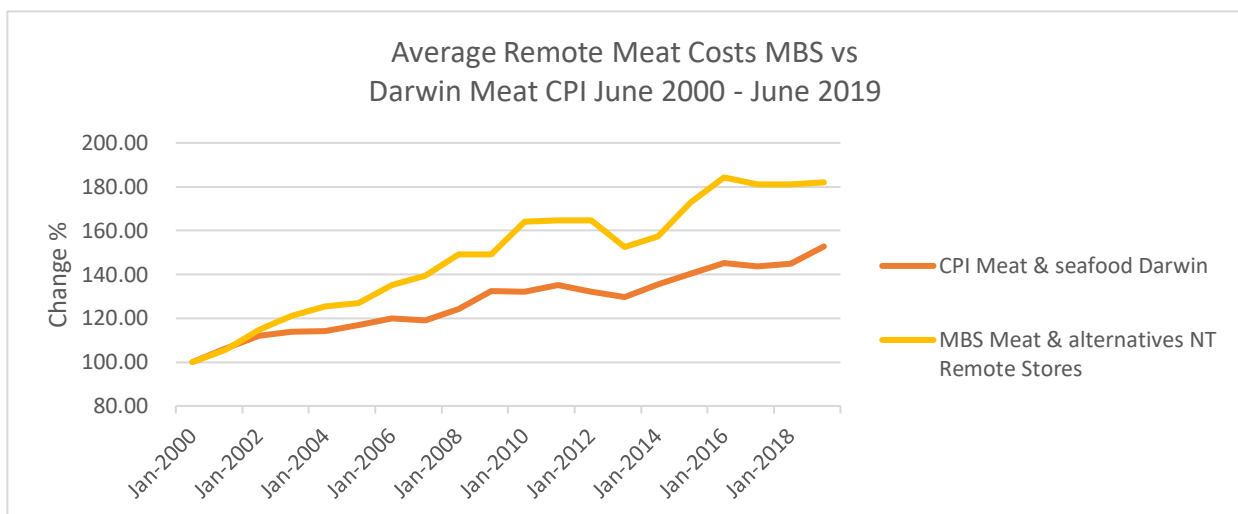
Figure 18: % Change in Remote Store Bread and Cereals Prices vs CPI Fruit, Darwin 2000-2019



ABS 2020, Data 4; NT Government 2019, p.19; NT Government 2020, p.24

- Up until 2012, the average price of bread and cereals tracked quite closely with the CPI for bread and cereals products for Darwin
- Between 2001-2013 the gap widened with prices for bread and cereals rising much sharply for remote stores, though the prices for remote stores have stabilised since 2014 (with the gap closing slightly)

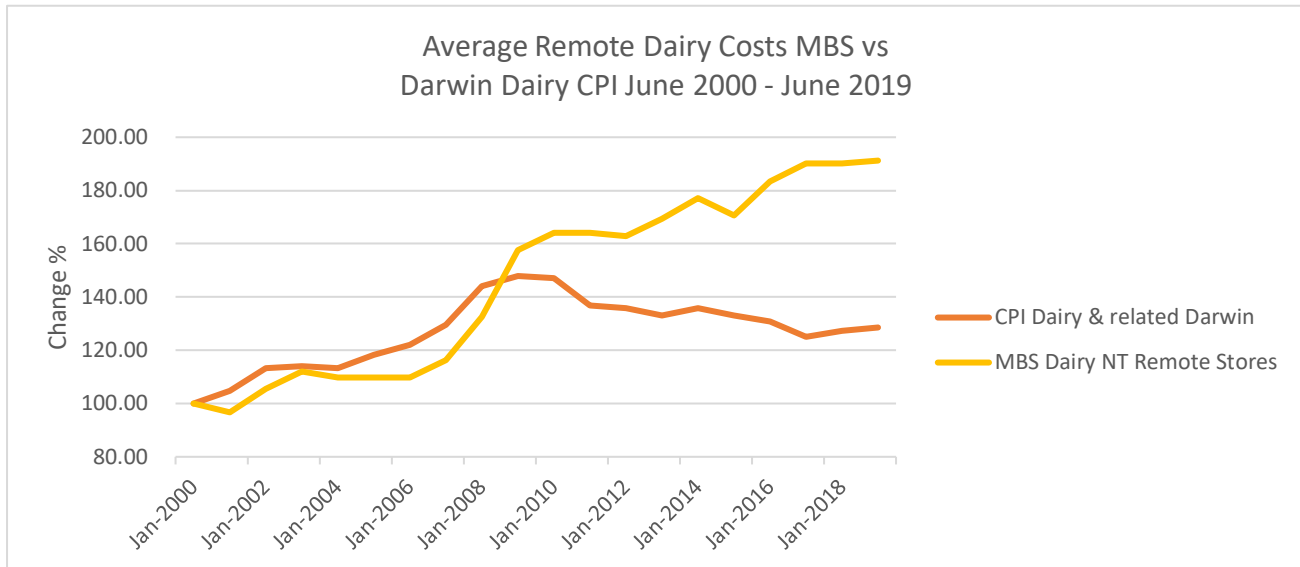
Figure 19: % Change in Remote Store Meat prices vs CPI Meat Darwin, 2000-2019



ABS 2020a, Data 4; NT Government 2019, p.19; NT Government 2020, p.24

- Between 2002 and 2016, meat and alternatives prices in remote stores have generally risen at a rate higher than the Darwin CPI for meat and seafood – apart from a sharp decline in 2013
- Prices then dipped in remote stores in 2017, and the CPI for meat for Darwin rose by 5.4% in the same year (its highest rate since 2002) – meaning the gap has reduced somewhat

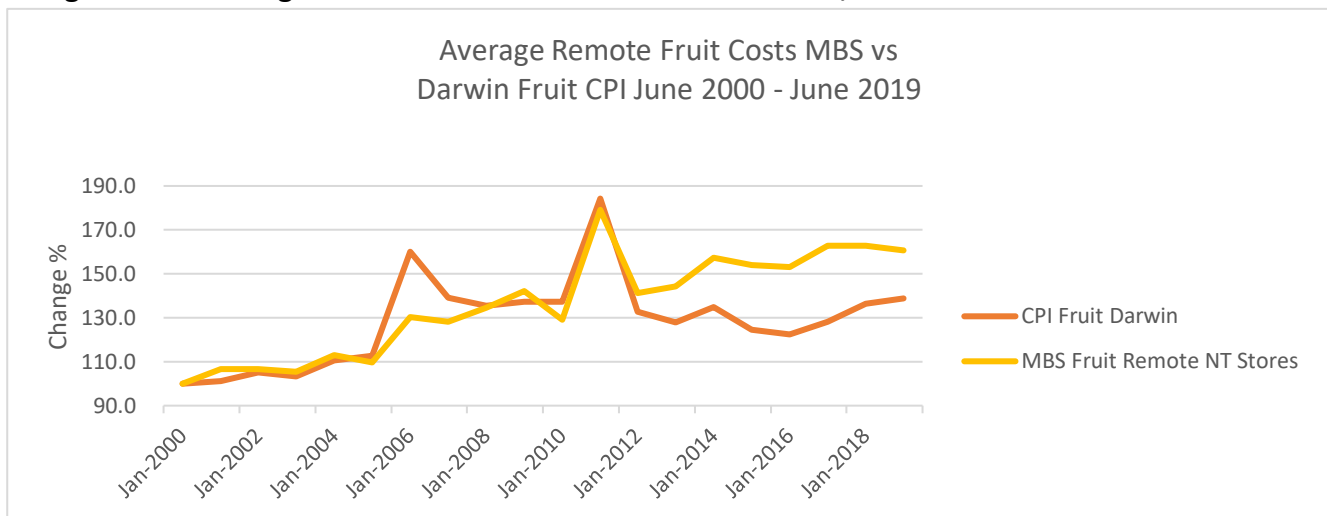
Figure 20: % Change in Remote Store Dairy Prices vs CPI Dairy, Darwin



ABS 2020a, Data 4; NT Government 2019, p.19; NT Government 2020, p.24

- Between 2000 and 2007 the rate of rise overall in the cost of dairy products in the Healthy Food Basket rose at a much lower rate than the Darwin CPI for 'Dairy and related products'
- In 2008 and 2009 the cost of 'Dairy' rose sharply in remote stores, and has risen steadily in the majority of years since— apart from slight decreases in 2012 and 2015.

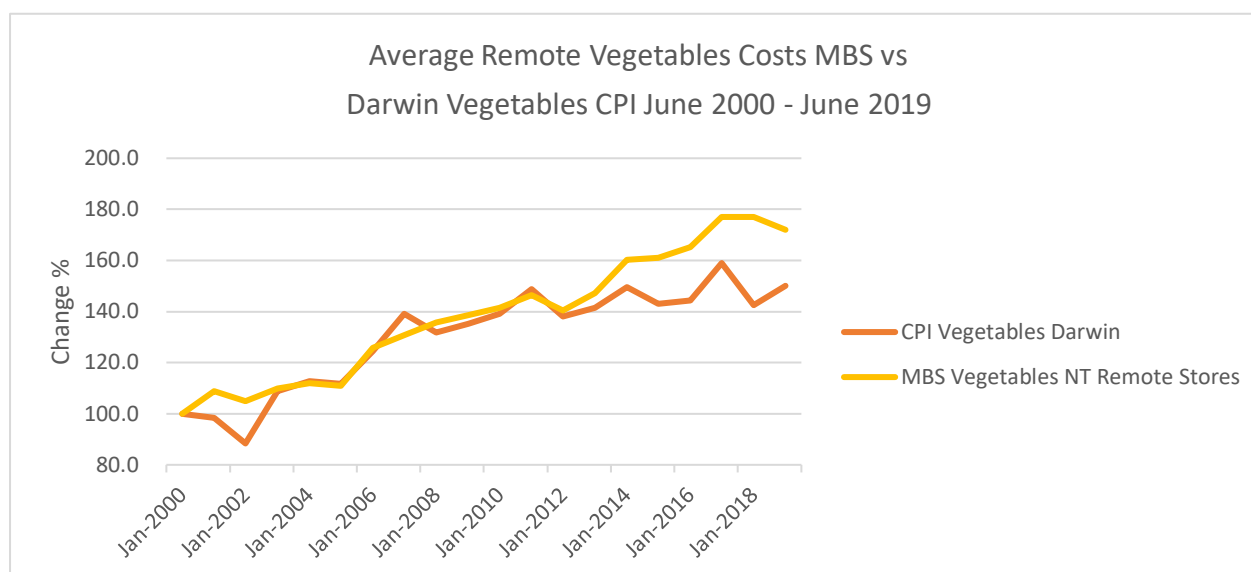
Figure 21: % Change in Remote Store Fruit Prices vs CPI Fruit, Darwin 2000-2019



ABS 2020a, Data 4; NT Government 2019, p.19; NT Government 2020, p.24

- Apart from 2006, the price of fruit in remote stores tracked with the Darwin CPI for fruit up until 2012
- Since 2012, the price of fruit in remote stores has generally (and consistently) risen at a higher rate than the CPI for fruit, or fallen at a slower rate than the Darwin CPI for fruit -apart from over the past two years
- NTCOSS attributes the decrease over the past 2 years in remote stores to the price decrease in Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) and Outback Stores (where subsidies on fruit and vegetables are provided – see below)

Figure 22: % Change in Remote Store Vegetable Prices vs CPI Vegetables, Darwin



ABS 2020a, Data 4; NT Government 2019, p.19; NT Government 2020, p.24

- In the early years of the MBS, the price of vegetables in remote stores tracked reasonably closely (though generally slightly higher than) the Darwin CPI up until 2008 when the gap started to widen
- The gap has widened further in more recent years, though the past year saw a slight closing of the gap as the price of vegetables in remote stores decreased (and in 2017 prices remained the same)
- NTCOSS attributes the recent reduction in price in remote stores to the price decrease in ALPA and Outback Stores (where subsidies on fruit and vegetables are provided– see below)

Subsidies on specific foods by Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) and Outback Stores

There are some positive initiatives that have been implemented by both ALPA stores (over a long period of time) and Outback stores (more recently) to reduce the price of certain healthy products – in particular fruit and vegetables

ALPA Stores

- “ALPA-operated NT stores all “self-fund a freight subsidy on fresh, canned and frozen vegetables, fresh fruit, and fresh dairy – reducing the sell price by up to 20%” (ALPA 2020, p.13)
- In addition, in ALPA stores, there have been price discounts “applied to bottled water..., artificially sweetened beverages..., infant formula (an option to sell at equivalent price to urban supermarkets) and healthy prepared food lines (sandwiches, salads, healthy snacks, and hot meals containing protein and vegetables) over a long period of time (ALPA 2020, p. 13)

Outback Stores

- Outback Stores do not add freight to the mark-up of “fresh fruit and vegetables and selected other lines such as baby formula” in order to support the sale of these items (Outback Stores 2020b, p. 17)

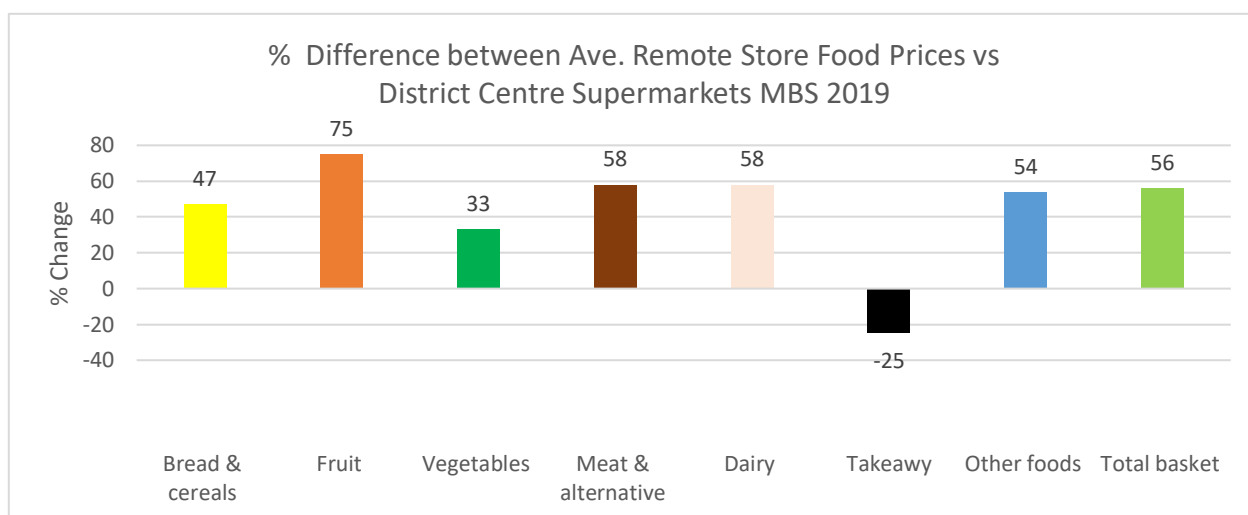
Table 10: Summary of CPI and MBS % price changes since 2000 and 2007 (when Outback Stores commenced)

	Bread & Cereals		Fruit		Vegetables		Meat*		Dairy	
% Change	CPI Darwin	MBS Remote Stores	CPI Darwin	MBS Remote Stores	CPI Darwin	MBS Remote Stores	CPI Darwin	MBS Remote Stores	CPI Darwin	MBS Remote Stores
2000-2019	46.8%	63.2%	38.8	60.7	50.2%	72.1	52.8%	81.8%	28.5%	91.2%
Since 2007	12.2%	20.6%	-0.3	25.4%	7.9%	31.7%	28.2%	30.6%	-0.9%	64.4%

ABS 2020a, Data 4; NT Government 2019, p.19; NT Government 2020, p.24

- The above five graphs show that prices in the five main food groups that make up the Healthy Food Basket for Remote Stores have decreased or only risen marginally (or not at all) between the 2017 and 2019
- Prices however still remain exceedingly high in all groups – with the price differentials between NT Remote Stores and NT supermarkets hovering between 33% and 75% higher for these groups – as evident in Figure 23.

Figure 23: Range of Cost of Food Basket in Remote Area Stores MBS by District June 2019



NT Government 2020b, p.10

The significant difference in price movement in most of the products highlighted above - compared with CPI rises for similar products in Darwin raises questions about what the drivers of the extreme price differentials are.

In addition, the variation in the cost of the food basket in remote stores within one district also raises questions as to what drives the price differentials within a region. For example, there is a \$439 difference in price between the highest and lowest cost of a basket in remote stores in the Alice Springs district; and a \$422 difference in the Katherine District (NT Gov 2020b, p. 9) (See also Figure 13: Range of Cost of Food Basket in Remote Area Stores MBS by District 2019).

Structure of Stores and impact on Food Prices

Another important consideration in the analyses of the price of healthy food in remote is an examination of the structure of stores (e.g. community owned, privately owned or those that come under either Outback Stores or Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) stores – referred to in the Market Basket Surveys as either Managed Store Group (MSG) or Owned Store Group (OSG) stores). This may assist in understanding some of the price variations within the same region. The following figures show the difference in price between Community stores (as a benchmark) and MSG/OSG stores - as well as Private stores. The comparison covers recent years since 2016 (when the composition of the Healthy Food Basket was altered slightly) with the situation a decade ago (in 2009). Note the Appendices in the 2019 MBS refer only to MSG stores.

While the composition of the Healthy Food Basket was slightly different in 2009, the important aspect of this analysis is the relative price of the food basket between stores – not the actual cost of the basket itself. Comparing the data over a decade also provides a basis for examining the impact of the introduction of outback stores in 2007. While Outback Stores data is not differentiated from ALPA stores in the MBS data, NTCOSS assumes that Outback Stores constitute a reasonable proportion of the 28 MSG stores in the 2019 survey (there are 23 Outback Stores in the NT) (Outback Stores 2020a).

The reason for the comparison with the community stores as a benchmark is that they were essentially the “standard” store in most communities prior to the introduction of Outback Stores – notwithstanding that ALPA stores commenced in 1972 in one part of the NT. In addition, we know that private stores are generally the most expensive stores and some private stores have a more limited range of foods available (as they may service a very small population). The community store therefore is more akin to an Outback or ALPA store (in terms of range of foods available).

Table 11: Comparison of cost of Healthy Food Basket in Community Stores with Managed Store Group (MSG) and Private stores over the past decade

	Price Difference for Healthy Food Basket (HFB)			
Northern Territory	2009	2016	2017	2019
MSG vs Community/Aboriginal Owned Store	0.6% higher	6.9% lower	6.5% lower	9.6% lower
Private Stores vs Community/Aboriginal Owned Store	0.5% higher	3.9% higher	9.5% higher	3.9% higher

Derived from NT Government 2010a, p.29-32; 2017, p.26-28. 2019, p. 26-28; 2020, p. 31-33

In the 2019 MBS Report, disaggregated data on type of store and cost of the baskets was not available for Darwin, East Arnhem and Katherine - with data for those regions being combined into a Top End category instead. Disaggregated data was however provided for Alice Springs. Analysis of this data for 2019 for Alice Springs region showed that:

- The average cost of the HFB was 14.2% lower in MSG Stores vs Community store
- The average cost of the HFB was the same for both Private Stores and Community Stores (but small sample size of community stores (4) so these figures need to be viewed with some caution) (NT Government 2020, p. 31-33)

A note of caution: As discussed on page 36 of this report, ALPA identified a large number of “pricing mistakes across the 12 surveys completed in ALPA operated stores” which they argue “increased the healthy basket cost by an average of 5.4% (ALPA 2020, p.14) – so it is possible that the actual difference in price between MSG stores and community stores is greater than the 9.6% lower cost as per Table 11. However, it is not clear if errors were restricted to ALPA stores or might have occurred for other stores as well.

NOTE: It was not possible to do a similar analysis of just fruit and vegetable prices to examine the impact of the subsidies on fresh fruit and vegetables provided by some MSG stores (e.g. ALPA stores Outback Stores), as there was no disaggregated data on fruit and vegetable costs for Remote Stores in the 2019 Survey.

In terms of the availability of food for the Healthy Food Basket by store type, data reveals that MSG/OSG stores (99%) and community/Aboriginal owned stores (97%) almost always have a full range of stock for the Healthy Food Basket – while private stores have 89% availability. These figures are similar to the availability for the food basket in 2009 (98%, 98% and 90% respectively) (derived from NT Government 2010a, p.29-32; NT Government 2020, p. 31-33).

Further work around of the different drivers of the high prices of food is required. In addition, NTCOSS believes that it would be extremely useful if there was further disaggregated data provided in the Market Basket Surveys – such as analysis of the difference in price between store types, and store sizes, for example.

The current partnership between AMSANT and the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, NPY Women’s Council and NTCOSS – the food summit project - (in developing community led solutions to food security and nutrition in remote areas at the community, NT and national level) is a significant opportunity to make some inroads into reducing the price of healthy food in the NT.

Consultation is currently underway with service providers and community members to hold a Food Summit in 2021. The Food Summit will be an opportunity for community leaders and stakeholders to come together, share ideas and develop recommendations that can be used to address food insecurity in the NT. The overarching goal of this approach is to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal people in the NT through improved access, availability, affordability and use of healthy food using community-led solutions.

In addition, NTCOSS looks forward to the outcomes of the Inquiry into food prices and food security in remote communities currently being undertaken by the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs. This is a very significant inquiry consulting with a wide range of stakeholder’s and provides a very important opportunity to address the issues that are impacting on remote food prices and to drive sustainable solutions.

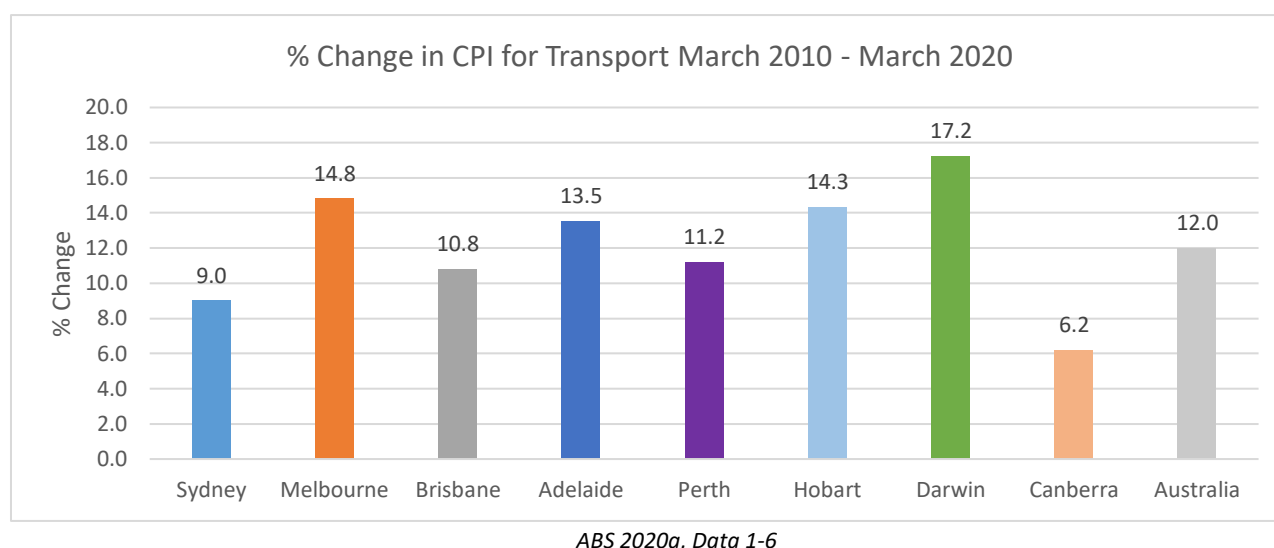
3 Transport

Transport costs are significant and essential, making up 13% of the weekly average household expenditure on goods and services in the NT. Having access to transport is essential for accessing work, education or training, or for accessing health services, banking and shopping and participating in society. While the most recent ABS Household Expenditure Survey (HES), 2017, showed that Territory households ranked as the 2nd most affordable in terms of transport expenditure as a proportion of mean weekly disposable income (due to high average NT incomes) (ABS 2017, Table 13.8, 13.9A), this average figure does not include 22% of the NT population in remote and Indigenous communities, and does not reflect the picture for a large number of Territorians

National Comparison: CPI Transport Darwin vs other jurisdictions

Figure 24 shows that the CPI for transport³ in Darwin rose 17.2% over the past decade, the largest increase in the country for capital cities, and above the national average of 12.0%, though just under the Darwin All groups CPI (17.5%), as evident in Figure 26.

Figure 24: % Change in CPI for Transport, Capital Cities 2010 - 2020



- The rise in the Transport CPI came despite a fall in the cost of purchase of motor vehicles (-7.4%) and the lowest rate of growth in fuel prices across the country (see Figures 30 and 31)
- The major driver of the CPI 'Transport' increase was the 88.9% increase in the CPI for 'other services' (See Table 12)
- Vehicle spare parts and accessories rose by 23.9% (See Table 12)
- Maintenance and repair of motor vehicles rose by 18.8% (See Table 12)

³ The CPI Transport Category covers the following sub areas of expenditure: Motor Vehicle (Purchase); Spare parts and accessories for motor vehicles; Automotive Fuel; Maintenance and repair of motor vehicles; Other services in respect of motor vehicles and Urban Public Transport (ABS 2011a, Table 1)

Figure 25: % Change over time, CPI for Transport for Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2020

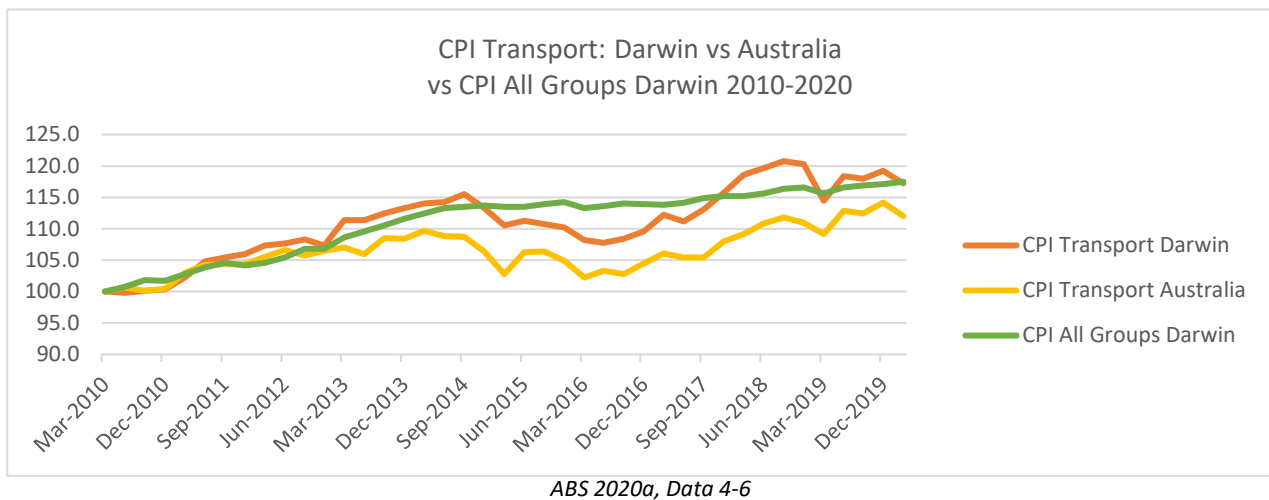


Table 12: Summary of changes for CPI Transport sub categories, Darwin vs Australia 2010 – 2020

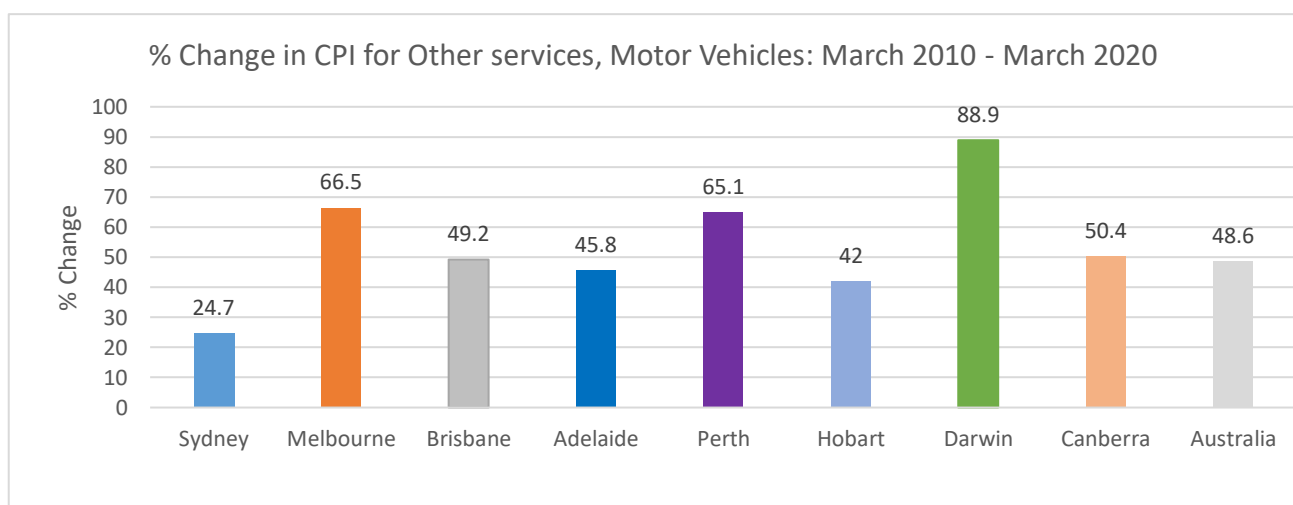
CPI Change, Darwin, between March 2010 – March 2020							
Transport CPI	Motor Vehicle Purchase	Vehicle spare parts	Automotive fuel	Maintenance and repairs	Other services MV	Public transport	All Groups CPI
17.2%	-7.4%	23.9%	3.6%	18.8%	88.9%	5.2%	17.5%

ABS 2020a, Data 5

National Comparison: Other services in respect of motor vehicles:

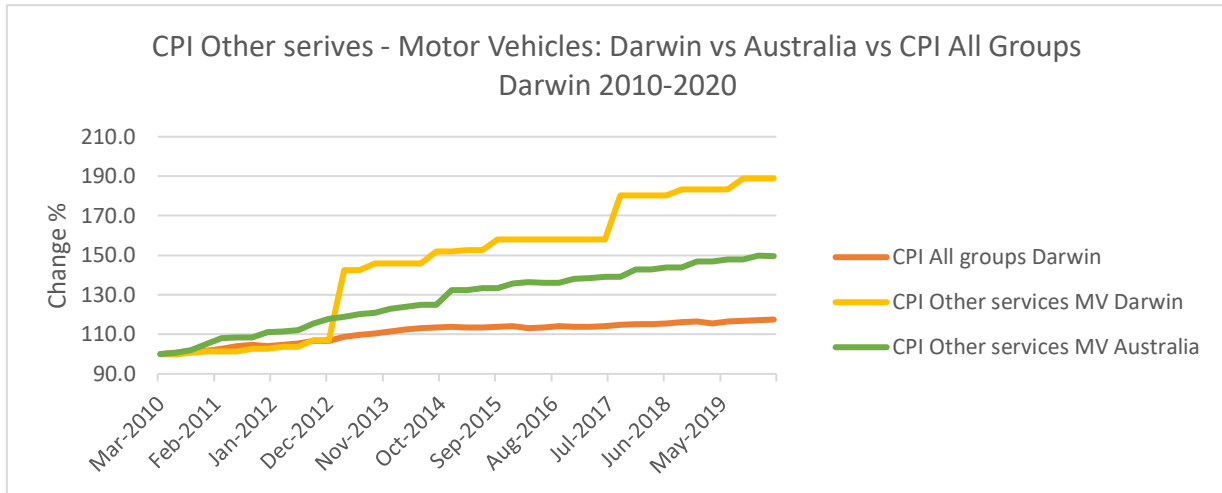
- The Darwin CPI for 'Other services with respect of motor vehicles' has risen fairly steadily and at times sharply over the past decade
- There was a rise of 33.1% in one quarter alone (March 2013), where during the same quarter CPI for the 7 other states and territories barely increased
- The 88.9% rise over the past decade was far and away the highest rise out of all states and territories, and well above the national average rise of 48.6%

Figure 26: % Change in CPI for 'Other services with respect of motor vehicles', 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 1- 6

Figure 27: % Change over time, CPI for Other services motor vehicles, Darwin vs Australia 2010-2020



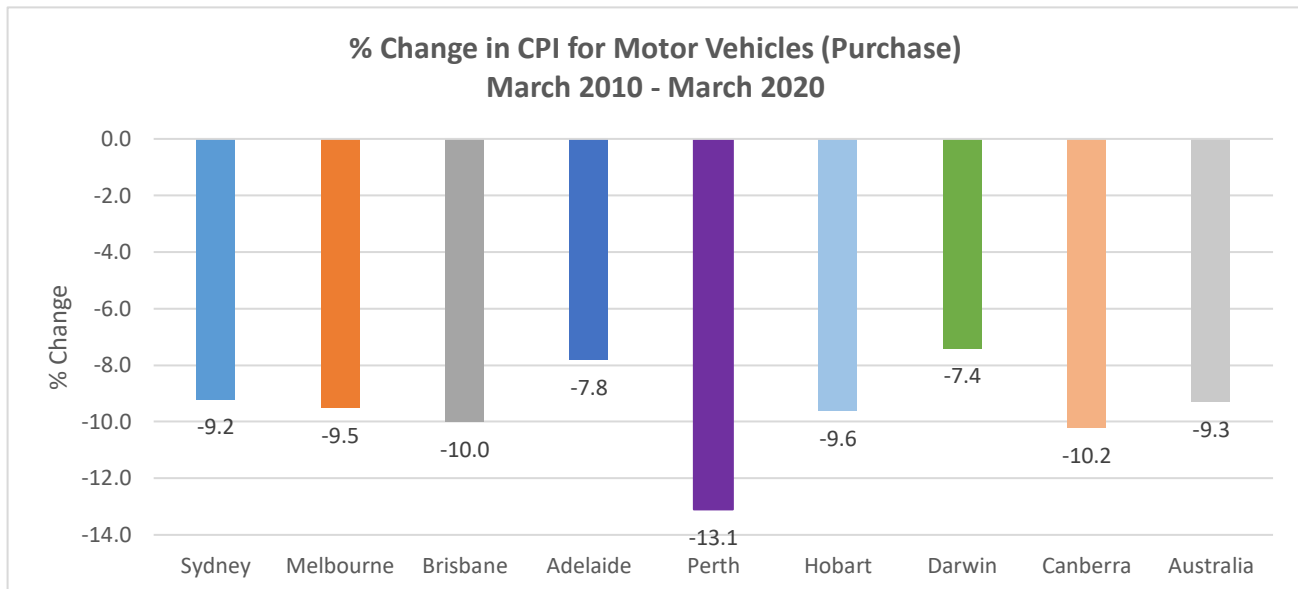
ABS 2020a, Data 4-6

National Comparison: Motor vehicles (Purchase) Darwin

Figure 28 shows:

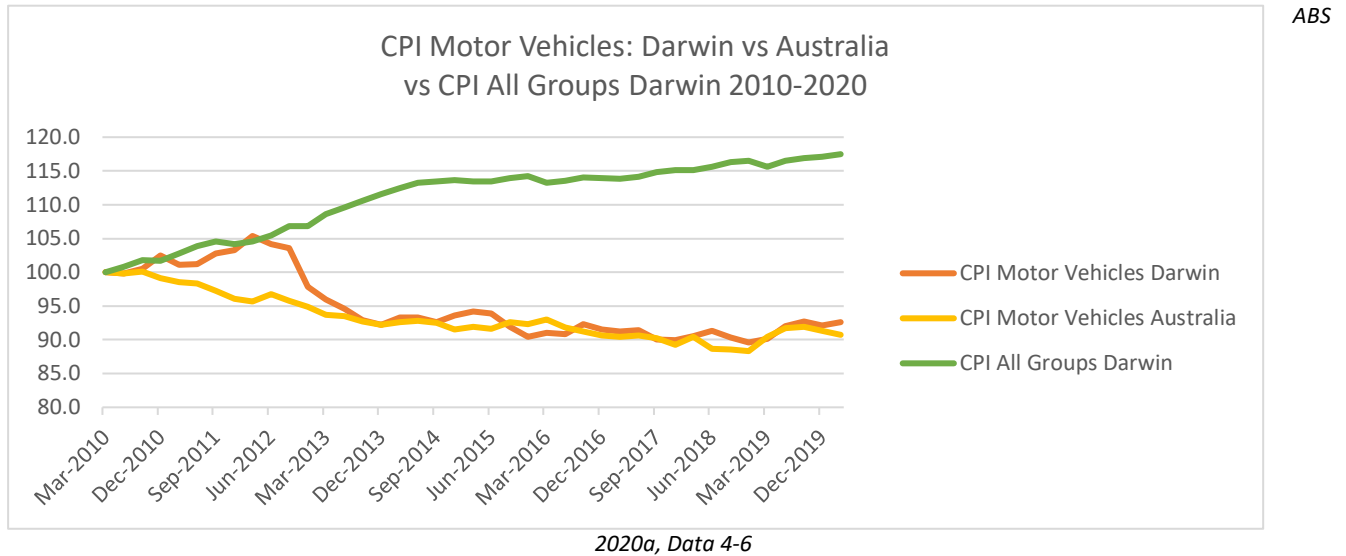
- The price of purchase of motor vehicles for Darwin dropped by 7.4%, which was fairly consistent with the national picture, with the CPI dropping in all jurisdictions.
- The Darwin and national CPI for motor vehicles (purchased) has dropped steadily over the past decade

Figure 28: % Change in CPI for Motor Vehicle Purchase, Capital Cities 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 1-6

Figure 29: % Change over time, CPI for Motor Vehicles (Purchase) for Darwin vs Australia 2010-2020



Automotive Fuel CPI Darwin: National Comparison

Figure 30 and 31 show:

- The Darwin CPI for fuel has generally fluctuated, at times wildly, over the past decade
- For the last five years the Darwin CPI for fuel has generally decreased at the same or at a lower rate than the national CPI for fuel (and lower than the Darwin all groups CPI)
- Overall, the price of fuel in Darwin has risen very slowly overall (3.6%) during the past decade – the lowest rise out of all states and territories
- The overall drop has been largely due to the significant price drops towards the end of 2013, and throughout 2015 and also again in March 2019

Figure 30: % Change in CPI for Fuel, Capital Cities 2010 - 2020

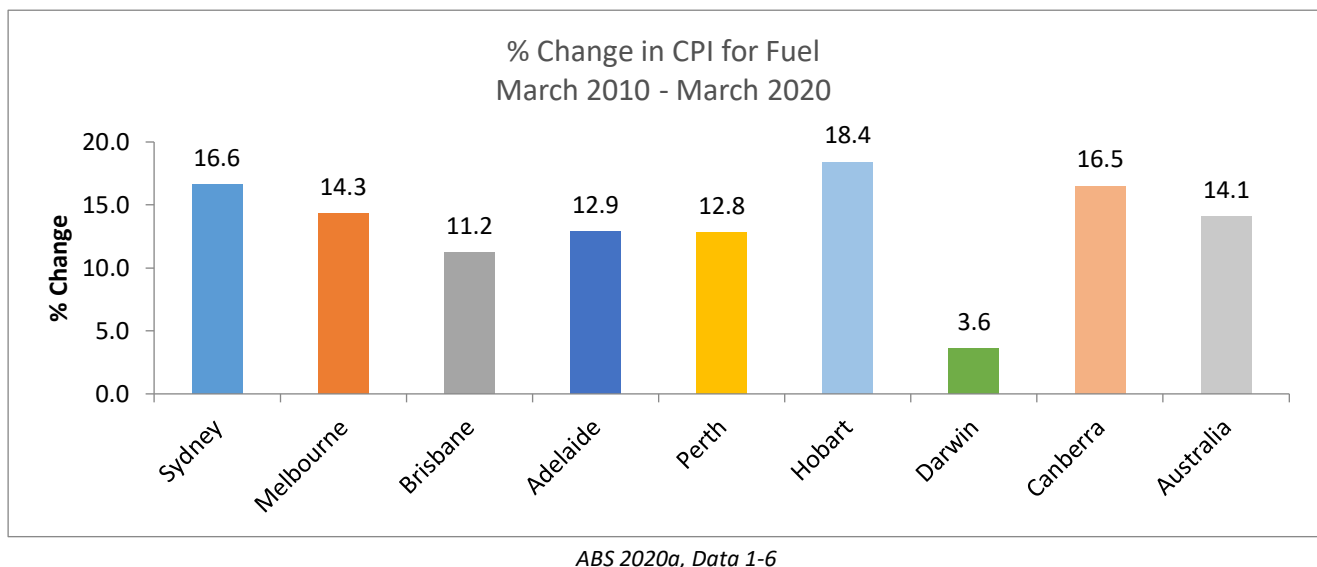
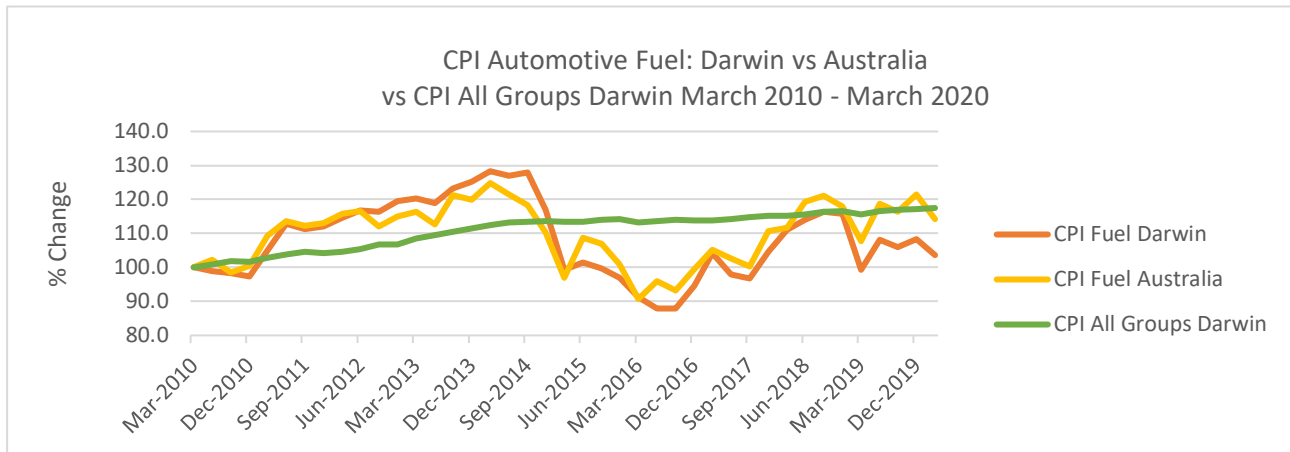


Figure 31: % Change over time, CPI for Fuel for Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 4- 6

Summary of major CPI Changes for Transport, 2010-2020

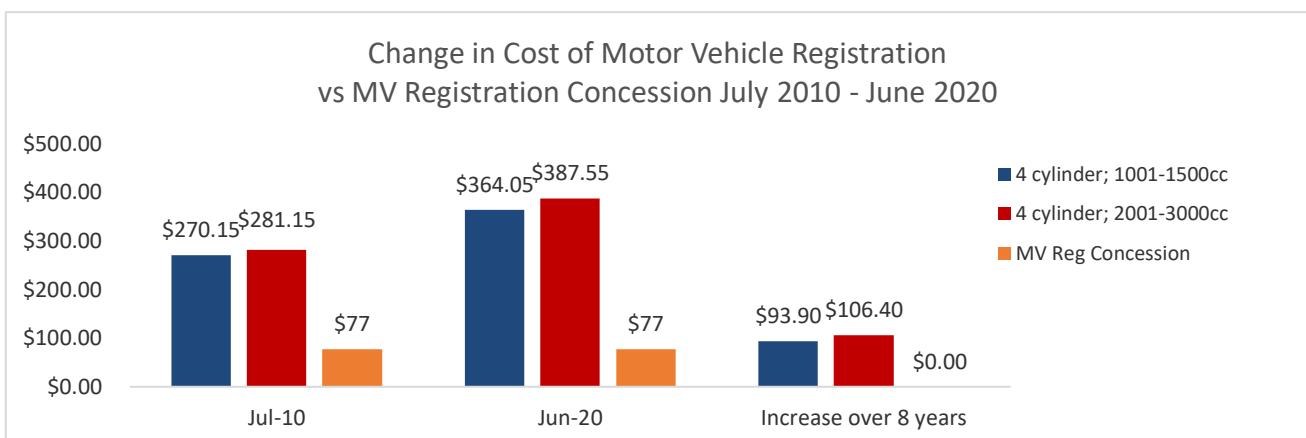
- The transport CPI for Darwin has risen overall at a similar rate to the all groups CPI for Darwin over the past ten years.
- The fact that the rise in CPI for automotive fuel has been well under the rise in the 'All groups' CPI will have brought some relief (in real terms) for motorists at the bowser
- The alarming 88.9% increase in CPI for other services in respect of motor vehicles, however, is cause for real concern. This dramatic rise will have contributed to cost of living pressures for many low income and disadvantaged households.

One of these areas of expenditure that comes under Other services is **motor vehicle registration**

Motor Vehicle Registration Costs

- One of the areas of expenditure that comes under other services is motor vehicle registration (including compulsory third-party insurance)
- Registration costs can come as a fairly large bill, whether 6 monthly or yearly
- Some motorists will be eligible for the pension concession on registration costs,
- The motor vehicle registration concession is not indexed which means it does not keep up with annual increases in fees for vehicle registration – as per Figure 32

Figure 32: Change in Cost of Motor Vehicle Registration vs MV Registration Concession, 2010 - 2020

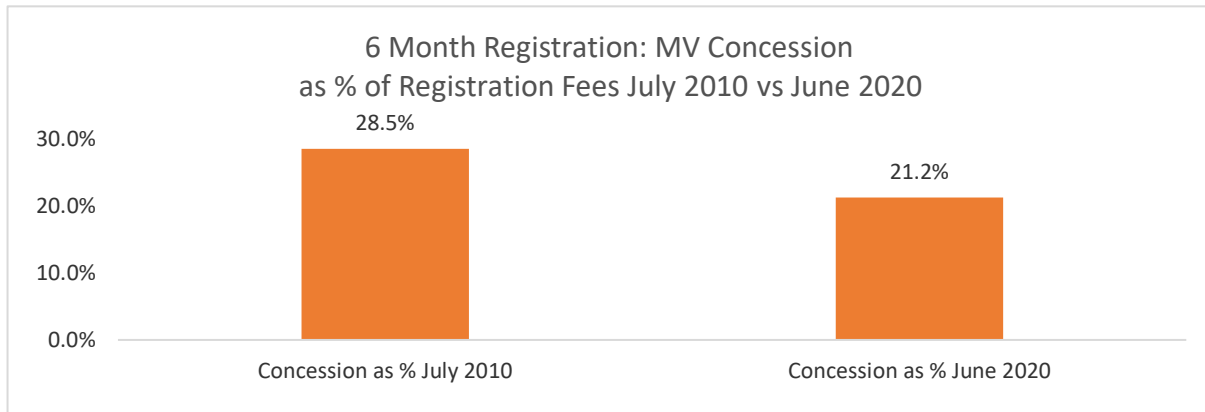


NT Government 2010b, p1; NT Government 2019, p.1

Motor Vehicle registrations costs for 6-month registration fees have risen since July 2010

- By \$93.90 (34.8%) for a 1000-1500cc motor vehicle; and
- By \$106.40 (37.8%) for a 2001-3000cc motor
- At the same time, the concession for motor vehicle registration has not risen at all – as there has been no indexation in place (see Figure 33).

Figure 33: Change in MV Concession as a % of Registration Costs, 2010 vs 2020



NT Government 2010b, p.1; NT Government 2019, p.1

Figure 33 shows that the concession as a proportion of the cost of registration has decreased from 28.5% to 21.2% over the past decade. The proportion will continue to dwindle as long as the concession is not indexed. These figures further reinforce the need for indexation of the motor vehicle registration concession to ensure it keeps up with cost of living increases for low income Territorians.

Transport Prices across regional areas of the NT

Fuel Prices across the regional areas of the NT

It is also critical to examine transport costs for regions outside of Darwin and Alice Springs – where access to a car is very important for people and where public transport options are limited or non-existent. While there is limited data available regarding regional and remote household transport costs, there is data on fuel prices and given the reliance on motor vehicles for a large number of households in regional and remote areas, this data is critical to examine.

Fuel price information for the NT is kept by the Australian Institute of Petroleum, and published by the NT Government in monthly economic briefs⁴ and provides an indication of price movements across the NT over time. The data is provided for regional areas and shows average prices on a monthly basis. The regional average for Alice Springs, for example, is a lot higher than what motorists would pay in the town of Alice Springs itself, as the average price includes remote areas in each region.

In this analysis NTCOSS has examined price changes over the past decade. Given the very significant reduction in fuel prices around the country since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, figures are analysed for both pre- and post-COVID price reductions.

⁴ "Caution is advised when using monthly data for the Territory, which is often derived from small samples and highly volatile" NT Government 2020d, p.3

Unleaded Fuel Prices: Changes over the Past Ten Years

Between June 2010 and February 2020, the Darwin region had a very minor increase in the unleaded fuel price (2%), much lower than the national increase of 11.8% (NT Government 2010c, p.1; NT Government 2020c, p.1). **In addition, the price in June 2020 for Darwin of 113.8 cpl is the lowest out of all capital cities currently (NT Government 2020c, p.1)**

The other regional areas, however, experienced very significant price increases over the past ten years, in stark contrast to Darwin.

- Katherine - the price increased by 24.7%
- Tennant Creek - the price increased by 29.0%
- Alice Springs - the price increased by 27.8%

(NT Government 2010, p.1; NT Government 2020c, p.1)

Prices have been historically much higher in the areas of the NT outside of Darwin, so it is not unexpected to see prices in regional areas increase at a greater rate than in Darwin.

#Note: Economic Brief Fuel price data is slightly different to the Darwin CPI figures, as the Economic Brief Data provides separate data for two fuel types (i.e. unleaded fuel, diesel) whereas CPI figures reflect all fuel types.

Price Decreases since COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, fuel prices have decreased dramatically across the country, including in Darwin and all of the major regional areas:

In the four months between February 2020 and June 2020

- Nationally the price of unleaded fuel decreased by 22.5 cpl (to 120.2 cpl)
- In Darwin the price decreased by 23.2 cpl (to 113.8 cpl)
- In Katherine the price decreased by 29.3 cpl (to 134.9 cpl)
- In Tennant Creek the price decreased by 16.9 cpl (to 175.9 cpl)
- In Alice Springs the price decreased by 17.6% (to 171.9 cpl)

(NT Government 2020c, p.1; NT Government 2020d, p.1) (see also Tables 25a and 25b in Appendices)

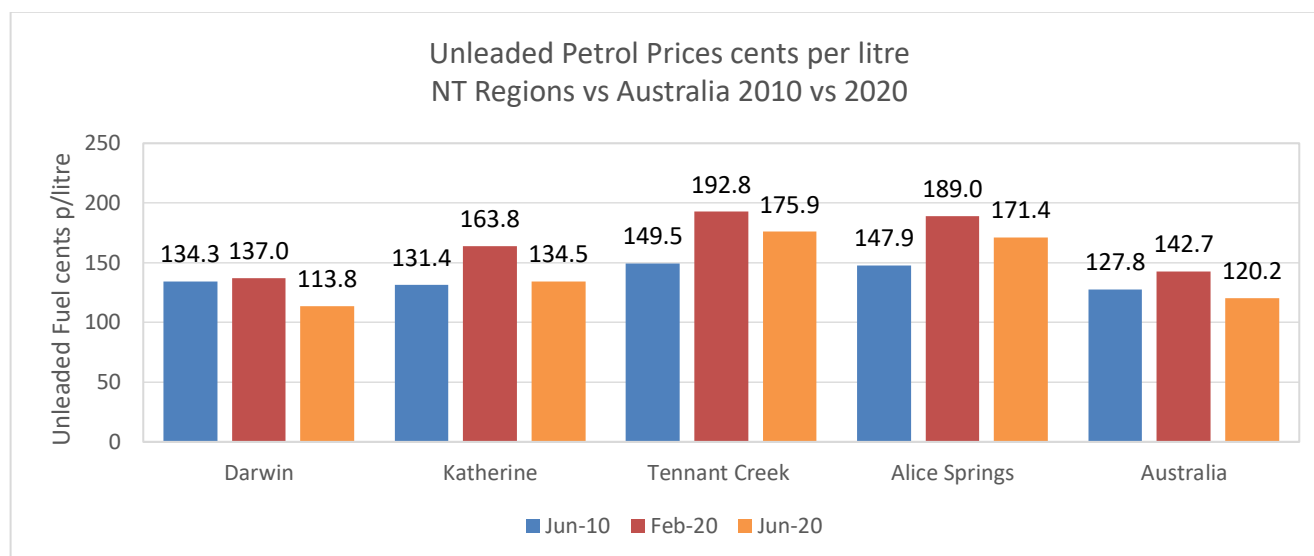
While these recent price decreases across the major regions of the NT will have brought relief at the bowser for many motorists, they have occurred due to very unusual circumstances which have led to a very difficult and stressful time for our nation. In addition, a large number of Territorian households have been impacted by job uncertainty, job losses or reduced hours of work.

It is also important to note, that until the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt across Australia, most regions of the NT had experienced very high and increasing unleaded (and diesel) fuel prices – which would have caused financial strain for many households, in particular low-income households.

Figure 34 shows the increase (cents per litre) for the four main regions in the NT at June 2010, in comparison with prices at February 2020 (pre- COVID-19) and at June 2020. While prices are lower at

the moment, it remains unclear what price changes may occur in the future as the national and global economy slowly recover in the future, over time.

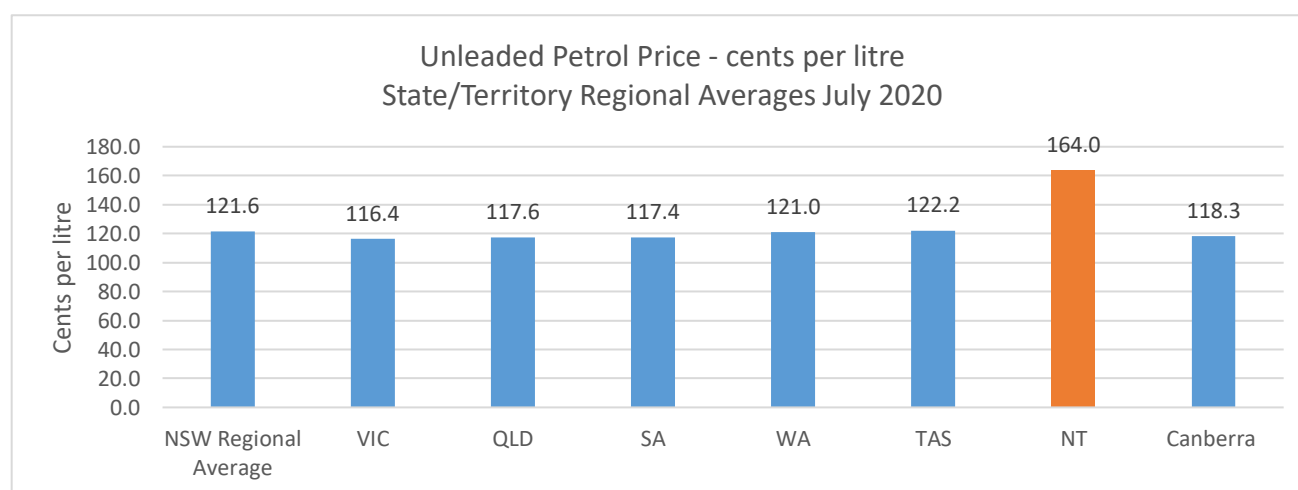
Figure 34: Unleaded Petrol Prices in the NT by region vs Australia, 2010 vs Feb and June 2020



NT Government 2010c, p.1; NT Government 2020c, p.1; NT Government 2020d, p.1

Despite the drop in prices for the Tennant Creek and Alice Springs regions – prices in both regions remain extremely high – compared with Darwin and nationally. In addition, **the NT has the highest regional average unleaded fuel price** in the country 164.0 cpl (as at 5 July 2020) out of all other states and territories (Australian Institute of Petroleum 2020).

Figure 35: Unleaded Petrol Price Regional Averages State & Territory Regional Averages July 2020



Australian Institute of Petroleum 2020

Note: Canberra figure contained with disaggregated data within NSW figures

Note: “The **Regional Average** price is calculated as the weighted average of the retail petrol prices for the non-metropolitan regions in each State/Territory, where the weights are based on the number of vehicles using unleaded petrol (Australian Institute of Petroleum 2016).

Diesel Prices

Between October 2011* and February 2020 Darwin had a very significant drop in the diesel price, whereas nationally, the diesel price effectively remained the same (**Note: October 2010 is the earliest that Diesel price data was available*).

In regional areas there were very significant price increases, in stark contrast to the price change for Darwin and nationally which rose marginally.

- Nationally the price of unleaded fuel increased by 0.2%
- In Darwin the price decreased by 10.5%
- The Regional NT average price increased by 12.1% (NT Government 2010, p.2 and 2020a, p.2).

Price Decreases since COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as with unleaded fuel, diesel prices have also decreased across the nation – evident in particularly in Darwin, and seen in the NT regional average price.

In the four months between February 2020 and June 2020

- In Darwin the price decreased by 27.5 cpl (to 114.0 cpl)
- The NT Regional Average price decreased by 19.3 cpl (to 164.8 cpl)
- The Australian Average decreased by 29.1cpl (to 119.2 cpl)

(NT Government 2020c, p.2; NT Government 2020d, p.2) (See also Tables 26a and 26b in Appendices)

These recent price decreases for diesel across Darwin and regional NT will have also brought relief at the bowser for users of diesel, as per with unleaded users.

While the drop in the price of fuel (nationally, as noted in the CPI quarter for March 2020) has been influenced by “the recent fall in world oil prices which flowed through to fuel prices” (ABS 2020b), the ACCC has previously stated that the decline in Darwin’s fuel prices in the early to middle part of the last decade “could have been influenced by factors such as the discount arrangement of the Automobile Association of the Northern Territory with United Petroleum sites in Darwin, and the increased scrutiny of Darwin prices by the Northern Territory Government [e.g. 2013 Fuel Summit], the ACCC and the wider community” (ACCC 2015, p.2).

Prices in remote areas remain extremely high

Prices in remote areas remain high – despite some recent price drops. In some remote areas the prices are virtually double what they are in Darwin, for example, as highlighted by MyFuel NT data

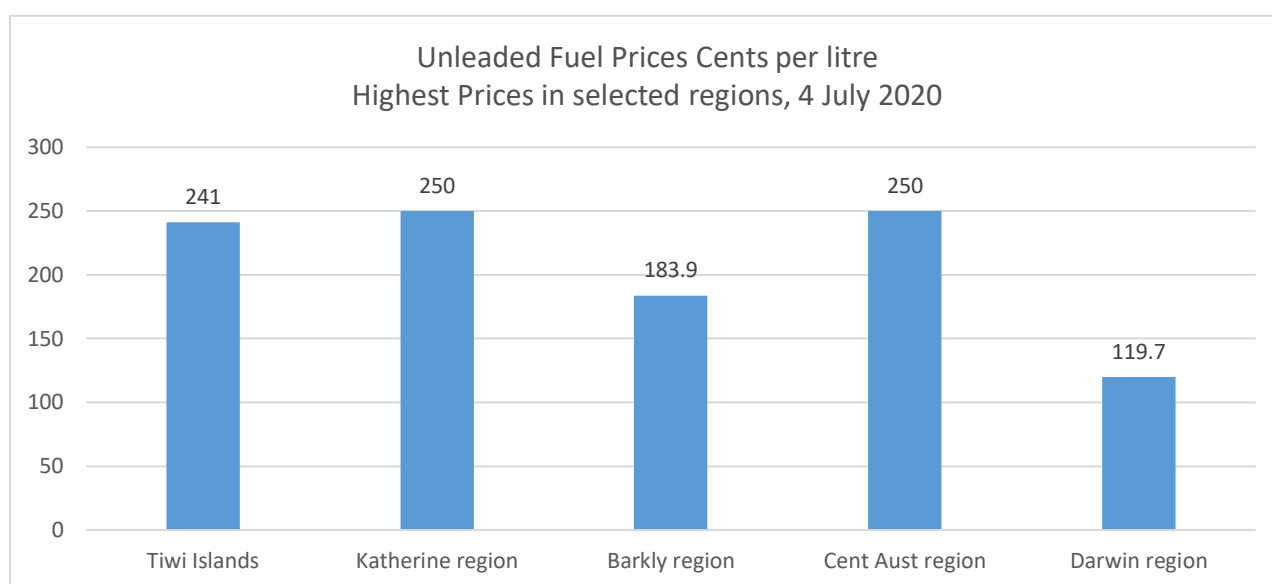
MyFuel NT Data from across the NT

MyFuel NT figures need to be interpreted with some caution, as the average figures supplied do not provide a weighted average (i.e. in terms of how many consumers are buying fuel at particular prices, so don't reflect an average of what people are actually paying). Despite the limitations in the data, the My Fuel App is a useful tool for getting a picture of fuel prices across all regions and many smaller communities across the NT. In particular the data does reveal the **extraordinarily high prices charged in some areas of the NT**.

The following figures help explain why the regional average unleaded fuel figures are so high (as per Figure 35 above). While some regional areas have seen average price decreases over the past year, motorists in most remote areas still pay extraordinarily high fuel prices.

The following prices were taken from 4 July 2020. with 250 cpl being the highest price in Central Australia. Similar prices in remote areas are seen for low aromatic fuel and diesel (see Appendices).

Figure 36: Unleaded Fuel Prices, Highest Prices in Selected regions, 4 July 2020



NT Government 2020e

Table 13a: MyFuel NT: Highest Price Data for Remote regions at 4 July 2020

<i>Highest Prices for each fuel type by region</i>		
	<i>Tiwi Islands</i>	<i>East Arnhem</i>
Unleaded 91	241 cpl	Not Available
Low Aromatic Fuel	255 cpl	273 cpl
Diesel	241 cpl	253 cpl
	<i>Top End Rural</i>	<i>Litchfield</i>
Unleaded 91	135 cpl	132.9 cpl
Low Aromatic Fuel	243 cpl	Not Available
Diesel	243 cpl	130.9 cpl

NT Government 2020e

Table 13b: Other Highest Prices in regional areas

Unleaded 91:
• 183.9 cpl (Barkly region)
• 250 cpl (Katherine region)
• 250 cpl (Central Australian region)
Low Aromatic Fuel:
• 220 cpl (Barkly region)
• 225 cpl (Katherine region)
• 234.5 cpl (Central Australian region)
Diesel:
• 225 cpl (Barkly region)
• 250 cpl (Katherine region)
• 250 cpl (Central Australian region)

NT Government 2020e

In addition, the variation in prices within the same region are at times extraordinary.

These prices for example, were found in the East Arnhem region on the same day on 4 July 2020:

- 273.0 cpl, Milyakburra
- 257.1 cpl, Numbalwar
- 102.7 cpl, Alyangula (Township)
- 264.0 cpl, Gapuwiyak
- 171.5 cpl, Nhulunbuy (Township)
- (NT Government 2020e)

For people forced to pay such exorbitant prices there are significant implications on the cost of living for households, diverting money away other essential items such as food and clothing. In addition, the high prices will at times be a barrier to having accessible transport to attend medical appointments.

The ACCC has identified specific factors that may impact on regional locations (and smaller cities) that contribute to higher fuel prices, including:

- “a lower level of local competition”
- “lower volumes of fuel sold”
- “distance/location factors”
- “lower convenience store sales” (ACCC 2018, p.26)

Clearly these factors are largely outside the control of any Government or body, however NTCOSS believes that further work could be done to explore the significant price disparities between petrol prices in many remote areas and larger regional centres in order to ensure that there is a fair and transparent fuel pricing system across the whole of the NT.

Fuel Price Comparison Apps

There is also a role for fuel price comparison apps as a way that consumers can have an influence over fuel prices (where there is competition (recognising that there may be limited competition in some remote areas)).

According to the ACCC Chair Mr Sims “the best way to keep petrol retailers honest” is for “motorists to use free petrol comparison appsto put downward pressure on prices” as the apps show that there are service stations with lower petrol prices and motorists “can save...money with just a small amount of effort” (ABC 2018). Fuel Apps can play an important role in terms of transparency of fuel prices, and NTCOSS will continue to report on NT fuel prices, given their significant impact on cost of living pressures.

Comparison of Alice Springs and Darwin Transport Costs

While the CPI figures only cover capital cities, data from the Transport Affordability Index (TAI), provided quarterly allows for a comparison between Alice Springs and Darwin transport expenditure.

Table 14: Household Weekly Transport Costs Comparison of Disaggregated Expenditure Areas – Alice Springs vs Darwin March 2016 - March 2020

	Darwin				Alice Springs			
	Q1 2016	Q1 2020	Rank 1= Highest	% Change	Q2 2017	Q1 2020	Rank 1= Highest	% Change
Car Loan Payments	\$125.25	\$127.38	1	1.7%	\$121.27	\$127.38	1	4.8%
Registration & Licencing	\$27.58	\$29.97	4	8.7%	\$27.73	\$29.97	4	8.1%
Insurance	\$26.12	\$31.34	3	20.0%	\$19.38	\$25.80	5	33.1%
Servicing & tyres	\$34.51	\$29.62	5	-14.1%	\$32.53	\$32.78	3	0.8%
Fuel	\$60.06	\$69.27	2	15.3%	\$74.50	\$82.14	2	10.3%
Public Transport*	\$20.00	\$20.00	6	0.0%	N/A	N/A	-	N/A
Tolls	N/A	N/A	-	N/A	N/A	N/A	-	N/A
Roadside Assistance	\$1.90	\$1.90	7	0.0%	\$1.90	\$1.90	6	0.0%
Totals	\$295.43	\$309.48	7	4.8%	\$277.31	\$299.97	1	8.2%

Note: An assumption in the TAI calculations is that there is no public transport in Alice Springs

Table adapted from AAA & SGS 2016, p 17; AAA & SGS 2017, p.27; AAA & SGS 2020, p. 27

A comparison with other jurisdictions highlights that

- Darwin: 2nd most affordable capital city for transport costs, in terms of proportion of income spent on transport – and had the lowest fuel expenditure for any capital city (AAA & SGS 2020, p. 16,27)
- Alice Springs: 3rd least affordable regional town (out of a comparison of regional towns in each state and territory – see Table 12). In terms of fuel expenditure Alice Springs was the 4th most expensive out of the regional towns (AAA & SGS 2020, p. 16,27)
- In addition, only two regional centres, Alice Springs and Launceston, had transport costs that “were less affordable than their city counterpart” (AAA & SGS 2020, p. 27)

Darwin vs Alice Springs: Weekly Expenditure

Table 15: Change in Weekly Expenditure (TAI) over the past 4 years, Capital Cities

Weekly Exp	Syd	Melb	Brisb	Adel	Perth	Hobart	Darwin	Canb	Cap. Ave
Q1 2016	\$412.39	\$352.80	\$380.99	\$288.07	\$306.16	\$279.02	\$295.43	\$305.80	\$327.58
Q1 2020	\$419.54	\$394.03	\$389.08	\$314.61	\$338.79	\$305.29	\$309.48	\$330.46	\$350.16
Rank Mar 2020	1	2	3	6	4	8	7	5	
Change 4 yrs	1.7%	1.7%	2.1%	9.2%	10.7%	9.4%	4.8%	8.1%	6.9%
% of Income Mar 2020	14.1%	14.8%	15.6%	13.5%	13.5%	16.3%	12.9%	12.3%	14.1%
Rank Mar 2020	4	3	2	6	5	1	7	8	

Figures adapted from AAA & SGS 2016, p.8, AAA & SGS 2020, p 6,10

Substantial toll fees included for Sydney Melbourne and Brisbane which accounts for their much higher overall transport costs

Table 16: Change in Weekly Expenditure (TAI) over the past 3* years, Benchmark Regional Centres

Weekly Exp	Wagga Wagga	Geelong	Townsville	Mt Gambier	Bunbury	Launceston	A/Springs	Reg'nl Ave
Q2 2017	\$254.96	\$277.50	\$256.72	\$273.42	\$259.39	\$266.84	\$277.31	\$266.59
Q1 2020	\$256.57	\$295.46	\$263.35	\$281.11	\$298.55	\$279.62	\$299.97	\$282.09
Rank Mar 2020	7	3	6	4	2	5	1	
Change 3* yrs	0.6%	6.5%	2.6%	2.82%	15.1%	4.8%	8.2%	5.8%
% of Income Mar 2020	9.4%	11.5%	11.0%	13.4%	12.8%	16.5%	13.3%	12.6%
Rank Mar 2020	7	5	6	2	4	1	3	

Figures adapted from AAA & SGS 2017, p.8; AAA & SGS 2020 p. 6,10

A comparison between transport expenditure in Darwin and Alice Springs shows

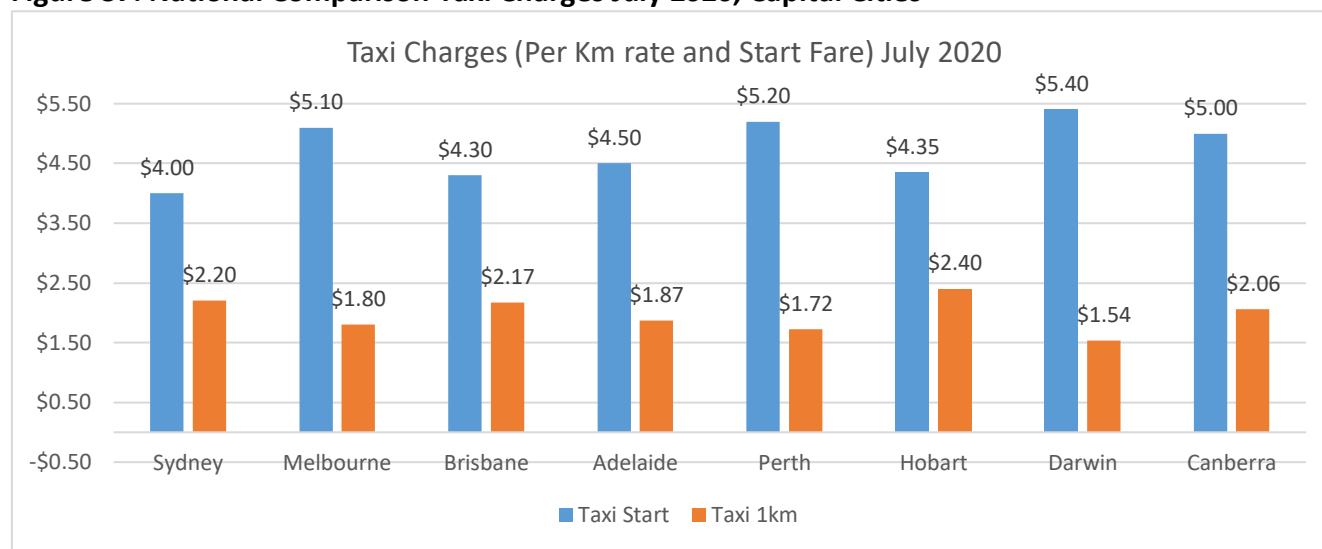
- Expenditure on insurance costs is \$5.54 higher per week in Darwin than Alice Springs
- Expenditure on servicing and tyres is \$3.00 per week higher in Alice Springs than Darwin
- Expenditure on fuel is \$13 higher per week in Alice Springs than Darwin (due to higher fuel prices in Alice Springs and the fact most regional centre households drive further than city counterparts⁵)
- But weekly expenditure in Alice Springs (\$299.97) \$9.50 per week lower than in Darwin (\$309.48)
- If costs remain the same all year around, the average yearly spend on transport in Darwin is \$16,093 per household vs \$15,599 for Alice Springs (Difference = \$494) (AAA & SGS 2020, p.27)

National Comparison: Taxi Fares

⁵ Regional households generally spend more on fuel as they drive further on average than their capital city counterparts. The exceptions are Wagga Wagga and Townsville (AAA & SGS 2020, p.16)

Figure 33 and Table 9 show taxi fare rates for capital cities across the country. Taxi tariff rates in Darwin compare fairly favourably with other capital cities – having the lowest per kilometre rate (\$1.54 per km) for a capital city. Although the flag fall rate is the highest out of the capital cities and the charge rate for waiting time is one of the highest, given the variables in the fare structure, it is the total cost of a trip that is the critical factor to examine (see Figure 38).

Figure 37: National Comparison Taxi Charges July 2020, Capital Cities



Numbeo 2020

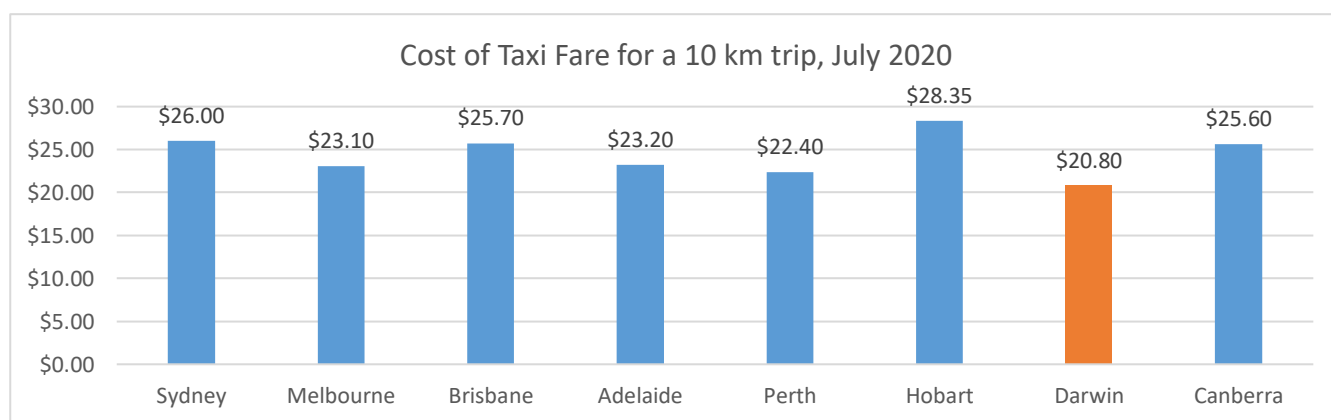
Table 17: Taxi Charges: 1 hour waiting times July 2020, Capital Cities

	Syd	Melb	Brisb	Adel	Perth	Hobart	Darwin	Canb
Taxi 1 hour waiting	\$56.66	\$34.20	\$49.20	\$39.30	\$49.00	\$34.20	\$55.38	\$56.00

Numbeo 2020

The reasonable rate of taxi charges for Darwin is confirmed by data on actual fare prices. Figure 38 shows the cost of taxis in Darwin are the lowest out of all capital cities – based on a 10 km fare (and is also the case for a 20 km fare). This is primarily due to Darwin having the lowest per kilometre rate (Numbeo 2020) as discussed above.

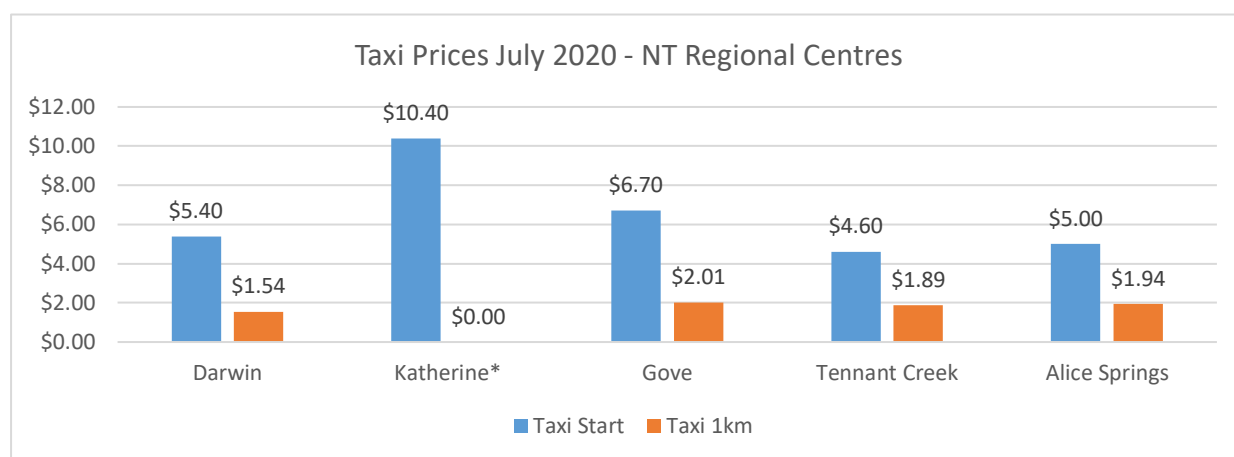
Figure 38: National Comparison Taxi Fares, 10 km, July 2020, Capital Cities



Numbeo 2020

When looking at taxi fare rates across the different regions of the NT, significant price disparity is evident. Gove, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs all have much higher per kilometre rates than Darwin (compare Figure 37 with Figure 39), meaning the overall cost per trip will be greater than in Darwin. For Katherine charge rates are provided for the start price (flag fall) only (NT Government 2020f) so it is hard to determine the impact on taxi trip prices for this comparison).

Figure 39: NT Comparison Taxi Charges July 2020, Regional Centres in the NT



Taxi Fare Calculator 2020
Note: For Katherine, 1km rate included in Taxi Start (Flagfall charge)

Table 18: NT Regional Centres Taxi Charges Taxi 1 hour waiting times July 2020

	Darwin	Katherine	Gove	T/Creek	A/Springs
Taxi 1 hour waiting	\$55.38	N/A	\$52.94	\$45.00	\$54.54

NT Government 2020f

The cost of a 10km taxi fare in Alice Springs is \$24.40 which is \$3.60 (17%) more expensive compared with Darwin (\$20.80) (Numbeo 2020). This is quite a significant difference.

Taxi prices in both Darwin and Alice Springs have risen over the past decade, as shown in the following table, For Alice Springs, the per kilometre charge (the most critical component of a taxi fare) has risen at a higher rate (17.6%) than in Darwin (13.5%) fees in Darwin.

Table 19: Change in price over time, Darwin & Taxi Fare Peak Times Rates, Mar 2010 vs March 2020

Peak Rates T1 (0600-1759hrs)	March 2010	March 2020	Increase in price (%)
Darwin			
Flagfall	\$4.10	\$5.40	31.7%
Distance Rate km	\$1.357	\$1.54	13.5%
Booking Fee	Free	Free	Free
Waiting Time p/h	\$46.75 p/h	\$55.38 p/h	18.5%
Alice Springs			
Flagfall	\$3.80	\$5.00	31.6%
Distance Rate km	\$1.649	\$1.94	17.6%
Booking Fee	Free	Free	Free
Waiting Time p/h	\$46.15 p/h	\$54.54 p/h	18.2%

Taxi Fare Calculator 2020

Cost of Taxi Fares in Alice Springs have risen faster than Taxi Fares are in Darwin

- Each of the components of the Alice Springs Taxi fare for Alice Springs rose above the rate of the All Groups CPI for Darwin over the past decade (17.5%)
- For Darwin, while both the flagfall and waiting time per hour rates increased above 17.5%, however, the Distance Rate per km (the most significant factor in a taxi fare) rose below the All Groups Darwin CPI

The taxi fare rates above are for the rates set by the NT Government for taxis and do not reflect minibus fares which are structured differently and not regulated in the same way as taxi fares. It is important to recognise that any taxi fare increases will have a disproportionate impact on low income households.

Money spent by low income households on expensive transport options reduces money available for other essential items, further exacerbating poverty. Due to the limited availability of public buses and limited community transport options⁶, many people who rely on these services live in outlying areas of towns, where travel distances into towns are greater.

The introduction of Uber in Darwin, and now Hi Oscar in Alice Springs and other ride sharing options provide additional competition and choice around transport services may assist in meeting some of the transport demand in the NT – but affordability issues remain.

In addition, the lack of an adequate transport system for remote and some regional areas in the NT, as highlighted in the NTCOSS cost of Living Report No.22 on Transport (NTCOSS 2018, p.47) contributes to a perpetuation of poverty, social exclusion and disadvantage for thousands of Territorians in remote areas

NTCOSS acknowledges that there has been NT Government investment in the intra-town services in a number of regional and remote areas – such as Tennant Creek (Tennant Creek Transport) and Gove (Gove Peninsula Bus Service) and Wadeye by way of subsidies for services - which are critical in terms of sustaining these services (NTCOSS 2016, p.30), and has supported the partnership between Tiwi Enterprises and Bodhi Bus regarding a regular service on Melville Island (NT Government 2016b, p.1).

NTCOSS supports further investment in services such as these and notes that the NT Government is continuing to make grant funding available for Inter-town or Intra-town services, “to increase passenger transport access in remote areas” ... “where gaps exist” under the NT Government’s Remote Passenger Transport Program (NT Government 2020g).

Affordable and sustainable transport services must continue to be established in the NT which meet the needs of all Territorians, so all can participate fully in social and community life.

4. Housing

⁶ ‘Community Transport’ initiatives are usually run by community based, locally driven, not-for profit organisations which set out to meet needs that conventional public transport does not, and which provide choice and flexibility to respond to passengers’ needs.

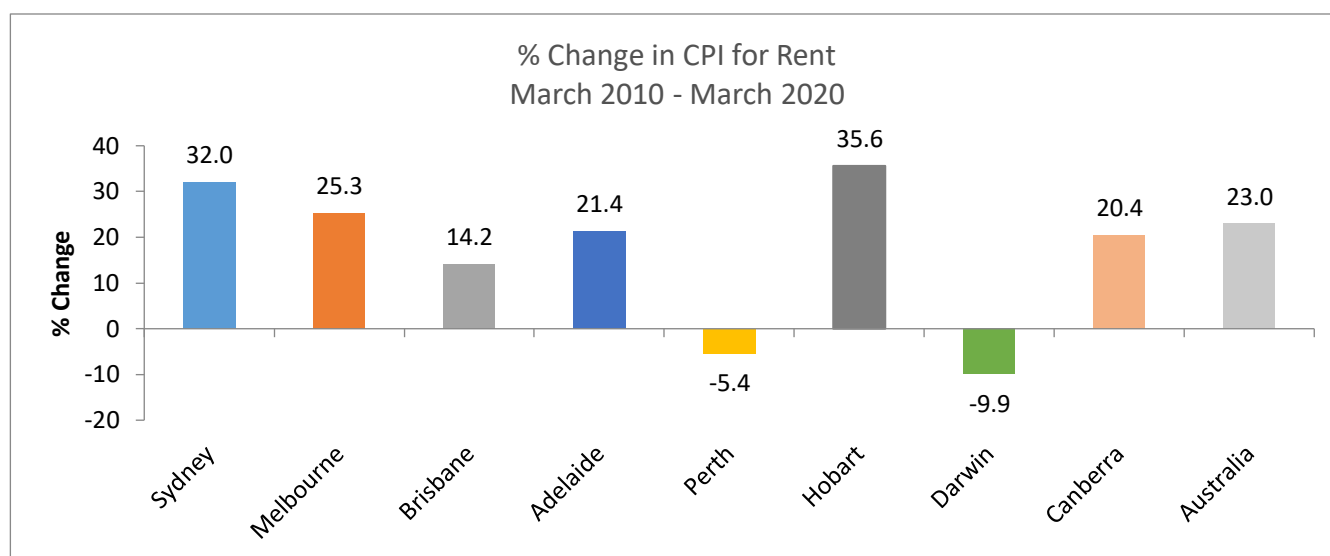
Shelter is a basic necessity for all people - and housing costs constitute the most significant weekly household expenditure category for NT households (making up 22.3% of weekly household expenditure (ABS 2017). This section of the report primarily focuses on rental prices given that renting is the more likely housing option for the majority of low income and disadvantaged Territorians.

Rents

National Comparison

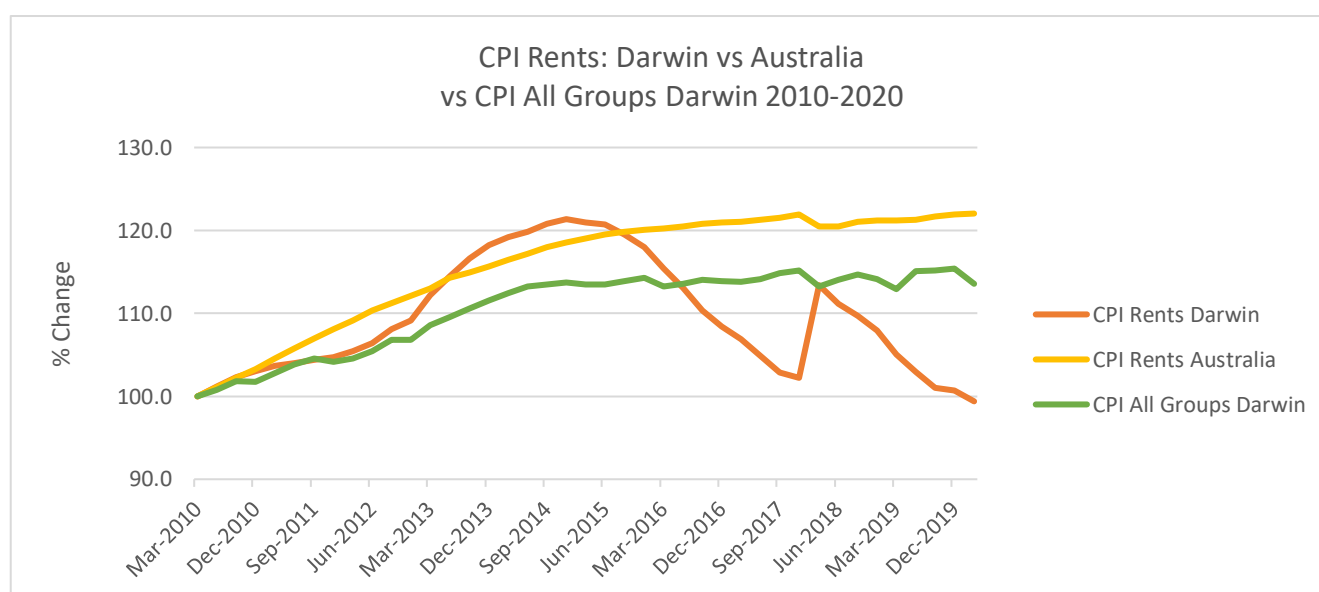
The CPI for rent in Darwin decreased 9.9% over the past decade – which was against the national trend where CPI for rents increased by 23%. The only other jurisdiction where rents decreased was Perth.

Figure 40: % Change in CPI for Rent, Capital Cities 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 1-6

Figure 41: % Change in CPI for Rents Darwin vs Australia 2010 - 2020



ABS 2020a, Data 4- 6

Rents across Regional Centres of the NT

An examination of actual prices and not just price movement for Darwin, is important in analysing affordability – along with analysing income levels.

Table 20: Median Rental Prices for Houses, Suburbs/Towns of the NT 2012 vs 2020

	3 Bedroom House			4 Bedroom House		
	Mar-2012	Mar-2020	% Change	Mar-2012	Mar 2020	% Change
Inner Darwin	\$660	\$525	-20.5%	\$1172	\$650	-44.5%
Darwin North Coastal (N'cliff)	\$559	\$470	-15.9%	\$766	\$580	-24.3%
Darwin North East (Marrara)	\$600	\$500	-16.7%	\$690	\$500	-27.5%
Darwin North (Sanderson)	\$512	\$400	-21.9%	\$573	\$500	-12.7%
Palmerston	\$503	\$400	-20.5%	\$633	\$500	-21.0%
Katherine	\$426	\$422.50	-0.8%	\$450	\$480	6.7%
Alice Springs	\$510	\$510	0%	\$663	\$650	-2.0%

REINT 2012, p.28-29 REINT 2020, p. 26-27

Summary of Price Movement in Median Rental Properties 2012-2020

Tables 20 and 21 show that:

For Darwin/Palmerston – significant downward movement in median rental prices

- For all Darwin suburbs rental prices decreased (where figures available) over the last eight years since March 2012 – for both houses and units
- The decreases were generally quite significant - with most decreasing at a rate greater than 15%

For Katherine/Alice Springs – median rental prices more stable

- Katherine and Alice Springs had increases in unit/townhouse rental prices
- The median rental price for 4 Bedroom houses in Katherine increased by 6.7%
- 3 Bedroom houses in Katherine and 3 and 4 Bedroom houses in Alice Springs had zero growth or slight decreases

Table 21: Median Rental Prices for Units/Townhouses, Suburbs/Town of the NT 2012 vs 2020

	1 Bedroom Unit/Townhouse			2 Bedroom Unit/Townhouse			3 Bedroom Unit/Townhouse		
	Mar-2012	Mar-2020	% Change	Mar-2012	Mar 2020	% Change	Mar 2012	Mar 2020	% Change
Inner Darwin	\$365	\$320	-12.3%	\$493	\$400	-18.9%	\$745	\$515	-30.9%
Darwin North Coastal (N'cliff)	\$291	\$245	-15.8%	\$399	\$330	-17.3%	\$578	\$420	-27.3%
Darwin North East (Marrara)	\$340	\$250	-26.5%	\$418	\$320	-23.4%	\$440	\$422.50	-4.0%
Darwin North (Sanderson)	N/A	\$229.60	N/A	\$399	\$300	-24.8%	\$460	\$407.50	-11.4%
Palmerston	Not listed	\$212	N/A	\$384	\$300	-21.9%	\$446	\$385	-13.7%
Katherine	\$203	\$255	25.6%	\$267	\$320	19.9%	N/A	\$435	N/A
Alice Springs	\$298	\$310	4.0%	\$402	\$415	3.2%	\$482	\$515	6.8%

REINT 2012, p.28-29; REINT 2020, p. 26-27

Summary of Median Rental Prices as at March 2020

- **3BR Houses** Inner Darwin has the highest median rental price for 3BR houses (\$525), with Alice Springs having the 2nd highest (\$510)
- **4BR Houses** Alice Springs and Inner Darwin currently have the highest median rental for 4 BR houses (\$650)
- **1BR Units** Inner Darwin has the highest median rental price for 1BR units (\$320), with Alice Springs having the 2nd highest (\$310)
- **2BR Units** Alice Springs has the highest median rental price for 2BR units (\$415)
- **3BR Units** Alice Springs and Inner Darwin currently have the highest median rental for 3 BR units (\$515) (REINT 2020, p.26-27)

Alice Springs Median Rental Prices Very Expensive

In previous Cost of Living Reports, NTCOSS has excluded Inner Darwin properties from the comparisons as weekly median rental prices for Inner Darwin were considered well out of reach of low-income households (as shown in Table 20, in March 2012 the median rental price for a 4 BR house in Inner Darwin was \$1172 per week). The price decreases for Inner Darwin over the last eight years now means that Alice Springs prices are on a par with Inner Darwin Prices for all housing types – with Alice Springs being the most or equal most expensive place to rent in three of the above five housing types.

Housing Affordability in regional areas

While median rental prices have dipped considerably in Darwin and Palmerston, and been relatively stable in Katherine and Alice Springs – the issue of whether housing is actually affordable is influenced by more than just the cost of rent. Income levels of households are another crucial component to consider.

Anglicare 2020 Annual Rental Affordability Survey

Data from the Annual Rental Affordability Survey conducted by Anglicare Australia assesses whether housing is both affordable (i.e. won't put the household in housing stress) and appropriate (i.e. suitable size). Private rentals were surveyed from realestate.com.au.

2020 Survey data reveals the following:

Table 22: The number of unique* properties both affordable and appropriate* in the NT, 2020

The number of unique* properties on the snapshot weekend that were both affordable and appropriate (number)		
1159 Properties Advertised/ Assessed for Suitability	Income Support Recipient*	Minimum Wage Earner
Number of Affordable/Appropriate	42	242
% of total	4%	20%

Anglicare 2020 p.3 (*unique refers to the fact that while a property may be suitable for more than one household type, it can only be rented to one household at a time)

Anglicare (2020, p. 3) found in the 2020 survey that only 4% of rental properties were "suitable for at least one household type living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress" - 42 out of 1159 properties.

"Regional analysis of the data demonstrates that it is almost impossible for households on income support payments to obtain private rental in Alice Springs and Katherine" (Anglicare 2020, p.3).

20% of rental properties "were suitable for at least one household type living on minimum wage without placing them in housing stress" - 242 out of 1159 properties (Anglicare 2020, p.3).

Table 23: The number of unique properties that were both affordable and appropriate in Alice Springs and Katherine, 2020

Properties Advertised (No.)	Properties affordable and Appropriate (No.)	
	Income Support Recipient Household	Minimum Wage Earner Household
Alice Springs (110)	2	1
Katherine (64)	0	21

Anglicare 2020 p.3

Tellingly, across the NT, not one single private rental property was affordable and appropriate for the for the following household types

- Parenting payment Single, one child under 5
- JobSeeker Payment, Single, one child over 8
- Age Pension, Single
- Disability Support Pension, Single, Aged over 21
- JobSeeker Payment, Single,
- Youth Allowance, Single, Aged over 18
- Youth Allowance, Single, In a share house (Anglicare 2020, p.5).

For the following household types, there was only one private rental property across the NT, both affordable and appropriate for the following low income household types:

- JobSeeker Payment, Adult Couple, Two children (one under 5, one under 10)
- Parenting Payment Single, Two children (one under 5, one under 10) (Anglicare 2020, p.5)

The impact of the Coronavirus Supplement

From 27 April 2020, all existing and any new recipients of the JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance and Parenting Payment began receiving an additional coronavirus supplement payment of \$550 per fortnight – paid on top of their existing payment. This amount will reduce to \$275 per fortnight from September 25 until December 31 2020 (Australian Government 2020, p.1)

Impact on Affordability of properties if the coronavirus supplement payment was permanent

Anglicare analysed the impact on rental affordability if (hypothetically) the additional \$550 coronavirus supplement payment was retained for these income support recipients.

The number of properties assessed as affordable and appropriate for at least one household type living on income support payments rose from 42 to 136 (12% of all properties) out of the 1159 properties assessed (Anglicare 2020, p. 6).

While there has been some relief gained over the 6-month period of the 2020 coronavirus supplement, NTCOSS is greatly concerned about the impact when this is halved at the end of September and comes to an end (31 December). Anglicare highlighted that **“Even with double the income, there are almost no properties affordable for singles on the JobSeeker Payment or Youth Allowance”** (Anglicare 2020, p. 6).

As Anglicare have stated: “The private rental market is failing people on low incomes in the Northern Territory with many households not able to afford appropriate housing” (Anglicare 2020, p. 2).

Rent Affordability for residents of Urban, Town Camp and Remote Public Housing

Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation has recently highlighted concerns about the rates of rent payable by residents of Urban, Town Camp and Remote Public Housing, given current levels of Centrelink income support and the current rent model (under the Department of Local Government Housing and Community Development (DLGHCD)

Table 24 shows the maximum rents payable by residents to DLGHCD:

Table 24: Remote Maximum Dwelling Rent

Classification	4 Beds	3 Beds	2 Beds	1 Bed
New/Rebuilt	\$250	\$230	\$175	\$150
Refurbished	\$200	\$184	\$140	\$120
Existing	\$150	\$138	\$105	\$90

Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation 2020b

Given the weekly single rate of JobSeeker (\$282.85*, as at 20 June 2020) and even with the current scenario with rent rebated to 25% of household income – a recipient of the JobSeeker Payment would have only around \$212 per week left over for all other household expenses and needs – an insufficient amount to live on.

Additionally, overcrowding is another significant issue for residents of Urban, Town Camp and Remote Public Housing. the NT with the highest rates of overcrowding in Australia (7% for public housing and 54% for ‘state owned and managed Indigenous housing’) (AIHW 2019). Over a 15 year period (2000 – 2015) there was a 72% increase of families on the public housing waitlist for Greater Darwin and Alice Springs (cited in NTCOSS 2020b, p.7)

NTCOSS (2020b, p.7) Overcrowding has a direct correlation to access to fresh and healthy food, with impacts on the capacity of housing and health hardware to cope with the number of residents, and the capacity of existing infrastructure for the safe storage and preparation of fresh food.

NT Shelter has recently been encouraged by recent activity by the NT DLGHCD to reinstate Housing for Health programs, albeit on a small-scale basis, in a few communities across the Territory. As NT Shelter highlights These programs are known to work effectively and represent outstanding value for money” and “provide a timely, local response to improve the health hardware and safety of housing and enable families to engage in health living practices” (NT Shelter 2020, p.5).

A number of policy and operational changes are required as a matter of urgency to address issue of housing availability and the cost of housing – particularly rental properties. A number of recommendations are made here, including some from the 2020-21 NT Shelter Pre-Budget Submission to the NT Government.

Implementing these recommendations would help ease the burden on NT households and work towards all Territorians being able to enjoy a standard of living that enables them to have their essential needs met and be able to participate fully in society and further develop and contribute their skills and experiences.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Fuel Prices across major centres of the NT

Note Table 25a uses data from Feb 2020 to show price change since 2012 prior to the impact of COVID-19 on fuel prices

Table 25a: Fuel Prices across the NT: June 2010 – Feb 2020: Unleaded Fuel

Unleaded Petrol	Ave. Retail Price	Ave. Retail Price	Price change	% Change
(Cents Per Litre)	Jun-10	Feb-20	June 2010 - Feb 2020	June 2010 – Feb 2020
Darwin	134.3	137	2.7	2.0%
Alice Springs	147.9	189	41.1	27.8%
Katherine	131.4	163.8	32.4	24.7%
Tennant Creek	149.5	192.8	43.3	29.0%
Australia	127.8^	142.7^	15.1	11.8%

Table 25b: Fuel Prices across the NT: June 2010 – June 2020: Unleaded Fuel

Unleaded Petrol	Ave. Retail Price	Ave. Retail Price	Price change	% Change
(Cents Per Litre)	Jun-10	Jun-20	June 2010 - June 2020	June 2010 - June 2020
Darwin	134.3	113.8	-20.5	-15.2%
Alice Springs	147.9	171.4	23.5	15.9%
Katherine	131.4	134.5	3.1	2.4%
Tennant Creek	149.5	175.9	26.4	17.7%
Australia	127.8^	120.2^	-7.6	-5.9%

NT Government 2010a, p12; NT Government 2020c p.1, and 2020d, p.1. # Includes surrounding areas/regions; ^Weighted average

Diesel Prices across major centres of the NT

Note Tables 26a uses data from Feb 2020 to show price change since 2011 prior to the impact of COVID-19 on fuel prices

Table 26a: Fuel Prices across the NT: Oct 2011* – Feb 2020: Diesel

**Note: Oct 2011 is the first year the Economic Brief (Fuel) Reports contained data on Diesel prices*

(Cents Per Litre)	Ave. Retail Price cpl Oct 2011	Ave. Retail Price cpl Feb 2020	Price change cpl Oct 2011 - Feb 2020	% Change OCT 2011 - Feb 2020
Darwin	159.2	142.5	-16.7	-10.5%
Regional Average^	164.3	184.1	19.8	12.1%
Australian Ave.	148.0	148.3	0.3	0.2%

Table 26b: Fuel Prices across the NT: Oct 2011* – June 2020: Diesel

Diesel (Cents Per Litre)	Ave. Retail Price cpl Oct 2011	Ave. Retail Price cpl June 2020	Price change cpl OCT 2011 - June 2020	% Change Oct 2011 – June 2020
Darwin	159.2	114	-45.2	-28.4%
NT Regional Average^	164.3	164.8	0.5	0.03%
Australian Ave.	148	119.2	-28.8	-19.5%

NT Government 2012, p.2; NT Government 2020c, p.2; and 2020d, p.2.# Includes surrounding areas/regions; ^Weighted average

Note: Caution is advised when using monthly data for the Territory, which is often derived from small samples and highly volatile (NT Government 2020d, p.3)

Appendix B: MyFuel NT Data over the past year

Table 27a: Unleaded 91 Fuel – Regional Data from My Fuel NT – Jan 2018 - Feb 2020 – June 2020

	Jan 2018	Feb 2020	June 2020	Highest Price 4 July 2020
Tiwi Islands	241.0	241.0	241.0	241.0
Darwin*	147.9	136.3	111.4	119.7
Litchfield	147.9	140.9	113	132.9
Palmerston*	149.1	134.3	110.8	119.5
Top End Rural	154.4	158.2	122.6	135
Katherine	162.4	176.0	147.9	250
Barkly	167.3	194.4	159.2	183.9
Cent Aust Region	190.9	207.5	201.1	250

NT Government 2020e

Table 27b: Low Aromatic Fuel – Regional Data from My Fuel NT - Feb 2019 - Feb 2020

	Jan 2018	Feb 2020	June 2020	Highest Price 4 July 2020
Tiwi Islands	227.0	248.7	231.7	255.0
East Arnhem	237.4	240.3	217.0	273.0
Top End Rural	182.7	199.2	182.6	243.0
Katherine	166.2	169.1	141.6	220.0
Barkly	178.9	186.5	170.4	225.0
Cent Aust Region	181.5	194.7	174.1	234.5
Darwin	N/A	141.2	112.6	Not available

NT Government 2020e

Table 27c: Diesel – Regional Data from My Fuel NT - Feb 2019 - Feb 2020

	Jan 2018	Feb 2020	June 2020	Highest Price 4 July 2020
Tiwi Islands	224.7	242.1	230.4	241.0
Darwin	145.8	142.6	114.0	113.9
Palmerston	147.0	138.3	111.4	111.9
East Arnhem	218.0	228.5	198.4	253.0
Top End Rural	168.6	185.5	166.8	243.0
Litchfield	145.2	145.1	116.7	130.9
Katherine	162.4	171.7	145.1	250.0
Barkly	176.7	190.1	170.3	225.0
Cent Aust Region	181.4	198.6	183.1	250.0

NT Government 2020e

* The Highest Price refers to the data available on a daily basis from the MyFuelNT website – with data taken from 4 July 2020

Appendix C: Table 28: Proportion of income needed to purchase the food basket, remote stores compared to Darwin supermarket, 2000 – 2015 and Healthy Food Basket 2016-2019

Year	Proportion of income Darwin Supermarket	Proportion of income Remote Stores	% Difference
2000	27%	37%	10%
2001	26%	36%	10%
2002	27%	35%	8%
2003	28%	35%	7%
2004	27%	35%	8%
2005	25%	34%	9%
2006	28%	36%	8%
2007	30%	36%	6%
2008	28%	36%	8%
2009	29%	37%	8%
2010	25%	36%	11%
2011	26%	38%	12%
2012	23%	35%	12%
2013	23%	34%	11%
2014	23%	34%	11%
2015	23%	33%	10%
2016	26%	34%	8%
2017	20%	34%	14%
2019*	20%	32%	12%

NT Government 2016a, p.18; NT Government 2017, p.17; NT Government 2019a, p.10; NT Government 2020b, p.9; Centrelink 2016 p. 2,11,13,27,32-33,37-38; Centrelink 2017, p. 2,11,13,27,32-33,38; Centrelink 2019, p. 2,12,14,28,32,33,35,40

Note: The figures for 2000-2015 relate to the period before the MBS measured the cost of two baskets – a Healthy Food Basket and a Current Diet Basket. Figures for 2016, 2017 and 2019 were not provided in the 2016, 2017 and 2019 Market Basket Surveys. NTCOSS has therefore done its own calculations for 2016, 2017 and 2019, using Centrelink household income based on household family members used in Market Basket Survey calculations (as per the methodology used in the 2015 Market Basket Survey - See Explanatory Notes).

In addition, note that in the 2016 MBS Report the cost of the Healthy Food Basket reported for the years 2000-2015 were slightly different to the costs of the food basket reported in the 2000-2015 MBS Reports, due to some adjustments made to the basket of goods being measured. (Compare for example Table 15, p.16 of the 2015 MBS with Table 15, p.16 of the 2016 MBS (NT Government 2016, NT Government 2017))

EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. Northern Territory Utilities Commission of the NT calculations of Annual Electricity Bills

“The annual electricity bill for an average Territory residential customer used for this review is based on assumed annual consumption of 8611 kWh of electricity and electricity prices consistent with the regulated tariffs set by the Territory Government through the Electricity Pricing Order. For comparison purposes, the commission assumed the level of consumption does not change with the level of disposable household income. The commission has used Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data to determine disposable household income.⁴” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.6).

“The affordability methodology applied by the commission in this review...better align[s] the methodology in this review with the AER’s Affordability report⁷, and in the commission’s opinion provides a more realistic assessment.” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.6).

“The commission notes that a key difference in the methodology used in this review compared to the AER in its 2019 Affordability report is the impact of concessions on low income household electricity bills has been removed from the AER’s data to perform a more equitable comparison across jurisdictions. This is because energy concessions are not consistently applied across jurisdictions and do not necessarily apply to all low income households.” (Utilities Commission of the NT 2020, p.6).

“In comparing the average Territory residential customer’s annual electricity bill as a percentage of disposable household income with those in the NECF jurisdictions, this review uses data from the AER’s 2019 Affordability report. In its 2017-18 reporting, the AER used a static national average consumption level across all years of the assessment, however changed its methodology in its 2019 Affordability report, which now uses the actual annual consumption data for each year in each region to compare electricity affordability across years and various jurisdictions. The AER’s updated methodology has also been adopted by the commission in this review.” (Utilities commission 2020, p.7).

2. Northern Territory Government Community Services Obligation (CSO)

The Northern Territory Government’s Department of Treasury and Finance provides Community Services Obligation (CSO) “funding to the Power and Water Corporation and electricity retailers in accordance with government policy regarding the provision of services in urban areas for:

- electricity supply to households and small business customers across the Territory at uniform tariffs
- water and sewerage services to all customers at uniform tariffs” (NT Government 2019b, p.269).

This CSO contribution is currently in the order of \$92.491M for electricity and \$7,378M for water and sewerage and means that the NT Government is providing almost \$100M in the current financial year to ensure uniform tariffs (‘postage stamp pricing’) for electricity and water and sewerage so that all residential households pay the same rate, no matter where they live in the Territory. This means customers are not paying for the true cost of electricity and water. (Note: there is a separate rate for business customers).

In addition, the NT Government also “subsidises utilities services in remote areas through the Indigenous Essential Services (IES) grant paid by the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development.” (NT Government 2019, p. 266). These are on top of the \$16.435M budgeted for the 2019/20 financial year by Territory Families to Jacana Energy (\$10.254M) and the Power and Water Corporation (\$6.181M) in subsidies for the provision of electricity and water concessions respectively, to eligible households (NT Government 2019, p. 265).

3. Regulated and Unregulated Electricity Networks

The Power and Water Corporation operates both regulated and unregulated electricity networks in the Northern Territory.

“The term 'regulated network' refers to electricity networks or grids that the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) is the economic regulator for. The AER’s role is to promote the efficient investment in and delivery of energy services in the long term interests of consumers. As part of this, it sets network revenue allowances so that energy consumers pay no more than necessary for the safe, secure and reliable delivery of electricity services.”

There are three regulated electricity systems in the Northern Territory, namely

- Darwin-Katherine
- Alice Springs
- Tennant Creek

Unregulated networks

“Power and Water also manages and maintains a number of smaller electricity networks, servicing small towns and communities. These areas are not connected to the three regulated electricity networks and are classified as ‘unregulated’ and are not regulated by the Australian Energy Regulator (AER)”. They are as follows:

- “Daly River
- Jabiru
- Borroloola
- Timber Creek
- Daly Waters
- Elliott
- Newcastle Waters
- Yulara
- Ti Tree
- Kings Canyon
- Nhulunbuy - surrounding rural areas only
- Groote Eylandt - Angurugu and Umbakumba only
- Indigenous communities under the Indigenous Essential Services program.” (Power and Water Corporation 2020)

4. NT Government Market Basket Survey

“In 1995 the then Northern Territory (NT) Department of Health and Community Services developed the NT Food and Nutrition Policy. One of the strategies identified in this policy was to develop a tool to monitor food cost, availability, variety and quality in remote community stores. The tool developed was the Market Basket Survey (MBS) and the first survey of a sample of remote stores was conducted in 1998 and the first Territory wide survey was done in 2000” (NT Government 2013, p. 4)

“The MBS includes a ‘food basket’ that consists of foods that meet the average energy and recommended nutrient needs of a hypothetical family of 6 people for a fortnight. The family was chosen to represent a cross-section of people who had important nutrient requirements because of their age and sex. The family consists of:

- a grandmother aged 60 years,

- a man aged 35 years,
- a woman aged 33 years,
- a male aged 14 years,
- a girl aged 8 years, and
- a boy aged 4 years.”

2015 Income level \$2496.04 *based on Centrelink payment rates for March 20-June 30, 2015*

(NT Government 2017, p.4,26)

2019 Income level \$2630.92, *based on Centrelink payment rates for March 20-June 30, 2019*) NTCOSS calculations

The foods that make up the basket to feed this family can be found in Appendix A of the MBS 2013, while more information on the Fortnightly Income for Hypothetical Family of 6 can be found at Appendix B of the MBS 2013.

In terms of developing the market basket, “The actual selection of brands and sizes was made in consultation with the leading grocery suppliers in the NT and with input from nutritionists regarding their observations in communities. The most commonly sold items were the ones included in the food basket.” (MBS 2012, p.5). “In addition to collecting information on cost, the MBS also collects information on store management, employment of Aboriginal people, existence of a store nutrition policy, community development initiatives by the store (e.g. sponsorship and donations), nutrition promotions and store worker training.” (NT Government 2012, p.5).

“As part of the survey, a major supermarket and corner store in each of the district centres are also surveyed to enable comparison of prices between urban and remote districts. The corner store is a small suburban supermarket that provides a benchmark store with a similar buying power to the remote stores. The income for the hypothetical family was determined by obtaining Centrelink and Family Assistance figures from the Centrelink website.” (NT Government 2012, p.5).

The 2013 MBS is the fourteenth annual survey of remote community stores in the Northern Territory. As the 2012 MBS (NT Government, p.25) highlighted, “Since the inception of the MBS, a number of changes have occurred that have the potential to impact the results of this survey. In early 2007 the Australian Government announced the establishment of Outback Stores, a company set up to manage stores on behalf of remote communities to ensure their commercial viability and a reliable supply of healthy, affordable food. Outback Stores began operating in its first store in May 2007.”

“In June 2007 the Australian Government announced the NT Emergency Response (NTER) in response to the *Little Children are Sacred Report*. Amongst the measures introduced in the NTER were Income Management (IM) and the licensing of remote stores by the Australian Government’s Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). By September 2007, the first community store was licensed and IM had commenced in that community. There was a gradual roll out of these initiatives to other communities and in January 2012, shortly before commencement of the 2012 MBS, 91 stores were licensed.” (NT Government 2012, p.25)

“The licensing of community stores was designed to improve both the management of stores and the quality of food they provide. As part of licensing conditions stores are expected to have a reasonable range of groceries and consumer items, including healthy food and drinks. The introduction of IM and stores licensing, along with an increase in the number of stores managed by Outback Stores, is therefore likely to have had an impact on some of the information monitored through this survey since 2007” (NT Government 2012, p.25)

“The Darwin supermarket and corner store were used as the benchmark against which remote community stores are compared [in the MBS]. The Darwin stores were chosen because the Darwin region is where the majority of Territorians live and similar surveys in other states use their capital city supermarket prices as the benchmark. The ‘corner stores’ (small suburban supermarkets) provide a benchmark store with a similar buying power to remote stores. (NT Government 2012, p.26).

5. Store Licensing

The Northern Territory Stronger Futures Act 2012, 2016 has a significant focus on food security, with this part of the Act designed to “enable special measures to be taken for the purpose of promoting food security for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory”. Food security in this context is referred to as “a reasonable ongoing level of access to a range of food, drink and grocery items that is reasonably priced, safe and of sufficient quantity and quality to meet nutritional and related household needs. The Stronger Futures Act “provides for a licensing regime for certain community stores operating in the food security area...aimed at promoting food security for Aboriginal communities (Australian Government 2012, p. 47).

Aspects of stores that are assessed in relation to license conditions includes “whether the store will provide a satisfactory range of healthy and good quality food, drink or grocery items [and] whether the store will take reasonable steps to promote good nutrition and healthy products” (Australian Government 2012, p. 56).

6. Limitations of the NT Government Market Basket Survey

The MBS Report acknowledges the limitations in the MBS survey and highlights a number of issues that must be considered when interpreting the results, including:

- Prior notice to stores “may have an influenced store prices and availability of foods during the survey period”
- The MBS does not attempt to measure the quantities of products available or purchased.
- Given that “the food basket has a relatively small number of items...significant changes in the price of one or two items may have an unduly inflated effect on the total cost of the basket
- The survey records “the price of a particular brand and pack size for many items” which may not be “the cheapest option for some items and actual food costs could be lower in all store types than is reported in this survey”
- The potential for variation in the prices of fresh fruit and vegetables given that the survey is conducted over a three-month period, though measure are taken to minimise the impact of this (NT Government 2019b, p.20-21)
- It is also not possible to track whether the same stores have been surveyed year after year, although, while efforts are made by the survey team to do this, it is not always possible (NT Government 2020b, p. 21). Fewer stores may be surveyed in a particular region from one year

to the next – which may influence the average price for that region. These factors may influence some of the findings contained in this analysis such as those reported in the year on year comparisons

7. Data from Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development (DLGHCD) regarding National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARH) footprint

Explanation for calculations of the 4776 remote houses with prepayment meters (as per p.23 in this report)

Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation (2020, p19-21) provided figures for National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARH) footprint communities and homelands: 5099 households total.

Of these 5099, 285 are Alice Springs Town Camps dwellings (who have Jacana prepayment meters) and 38 are dwellings in the Mutiljulu Community (who have an arrangement with Parks & Wildlife for their electricity). This leaves 4776 houses who would have power supplied by the Indigenous Essential Services.

The following analysis of aspects of the 2019 Market Basket Survey (MBS) Full Report is based on the information and data available in the Report and NTCOSS does not have access to all of the raw data to analyse trends as thoroughly as might be desirable – for example the de-identified data on locations of remote stores profiled in the Appendix of the MBS means that it is not possible to analyse what impact degrees of remoteness may have in terms of influencing the price of a healthy food basket. Stark inequities in price within stores in the same region can be difficult to explain or explore further beyond speculation, based on the currently publicly available data in the MBS reports.

8. Electricity Price Comparison: 2017/18 Figures

Table 29: National Comparison: Residential Electricity Prices (cents per kw/h), Market Offer⁷

State/Terr	NSW	Vic	SE Qld*	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Nat
	30.59	29.29	28.17	37.78	30.13	23.62	25.88	23.68	30.24

AEMC 2018, p.59, 65,71,76,82,89,95,100,106⁷

2018 figures are used here, taken from the AEMC 2018 Residential Electricity Price Trends Review Report as the figures for the NT were not included in the AEMC 2019 Residential Electricity Price Trends Review Report as the price provided by the Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF) to perform the analysis was no longer an accurate representation of wholesale costs (AEMC 2019, Introductory pages).

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⁷ The weighted average of retailer's lowest market offers for the representative consumer was used in South East Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. The weighted average of retailer's lowest standing offers for the representative consumer was used in the ACT and Tasmania. The electricity price set by the state or territory government was used for Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Also, note that Victorian prices are set on a calendar year basis. (AEMC 2018, p.58)

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