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Introduction

This report tracks changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged South Australians.

The first part uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Selected Living Cost Indexes (ABS, 2017a) and Consumer Price Index (ABS, 2017c) to show key changes in the cost of living in the last quarter and over the last 12 months.

As a summary measure, the Selected Living Cost Indexes are preferred over the better known Consumer Price Index (CPI) because the CPI is technically not a cost of living measure. It tracks changes in the price of a specific basket of goods, but this basket includes goods and services that are not part of the expenditure of all households, and poor households in particular. When considering the cost of living, this is important because if expenditure on bare essentials makes up the vast bulk (or entirety) of expenditure for low income households, then price increases in those areas are crucial whilst price increases or decreases on other discretionary goods are less relevant. However, increases in the prices of bare essentials may be masked in the generic CPI by rises or falls in other goods and services in the CPI basket.

The Selected Living Cost Indexes use a different methodology to CPI (see Appendix: Explanatory Note 1) and they disaggregate expenditure into a number of different household types (ABS, 2017b), although this *Cost of Living Update* focuses on the "Aged Pension" and "Other government transfer recipients" (hereafter "other social security recipients") figures, as these are likely to represent the more disadvantaged households. While the Selected Living Cost Indexes also have limitations in tracking cost of living changes for these groups (see Explanatory Note 2), they do provide a robust statistical base, a long time series, and quarterly tracking of changes – all of which is useful data for analysis. This report also adds to the Selected Living Cost Indexes by putting a dollar value on the changes, and by using disaggregated CPI data to summarise changes in prices of key items.

SACOSS *Cost of Living Updates* sometimes also contain a second section with a more in-depth analysis of cost of living trends in one key area of concern in relation to cost of living pressures on vulnerable and disadvantaged South Australians. There is no second section in this report.

SECTION 1: March Quarter 2017 Cost of Living Changes

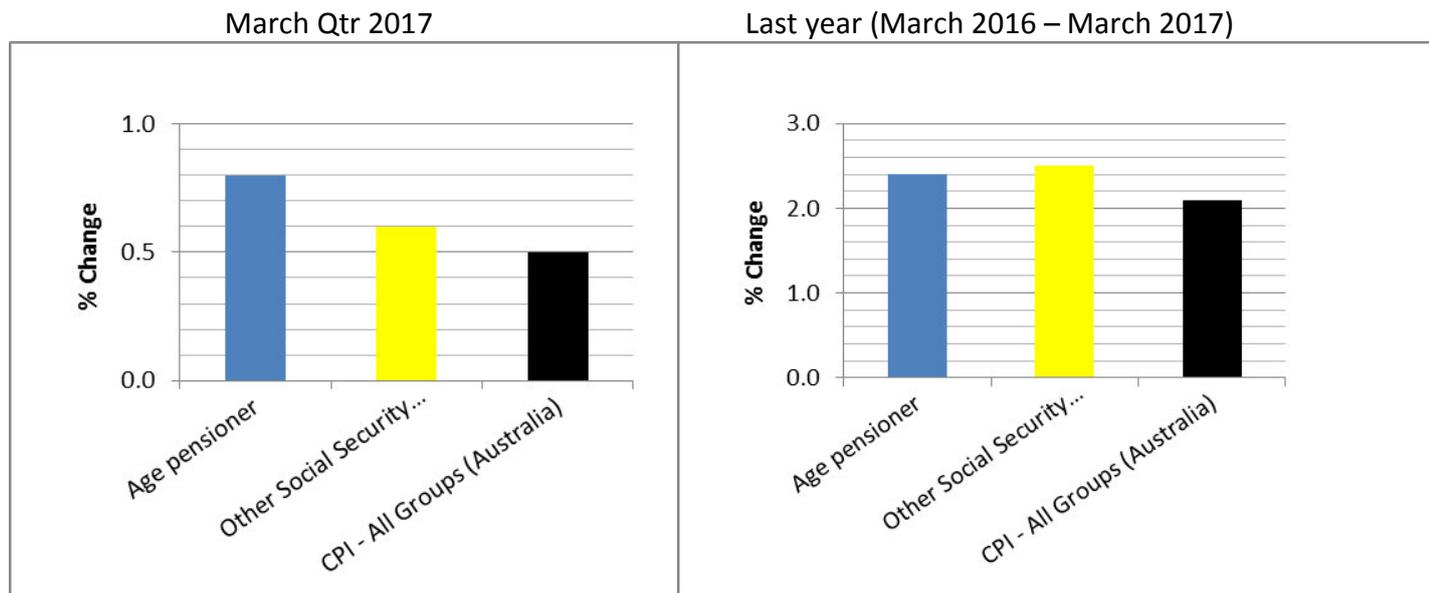
Prices

In the March 2017 quarter, the cost of living (as measured by the ABS Selected Living Cost Indexes) for age pensioners rose by 0.8%, while for other social security recipients the cost of living rose by 0.6%. CPI in the same period rose by 0.5% nationally and 0.4% in Adelaide (ABS, 2017a; ABS, 2017c).

The main contributors to the cost of living rise in the last quarter for pensioners and social security recipients were health costs (driven by the cyclical reduction in the proportion of patients who qualify for subsidies under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and Medicare Benefit Scheme). Health, and in particular pharmaceuticals, is a larger part of the household budget for social security recipients than for other households, while petrol prices also drove up costs particularly for other social security recipients. The offsets were seasonal price falls in clothing and household furnishings due to post Christmas specials.

Over the last year (March Qtr 2016 – March Qtr 2017), the living cost indexes for age pensioners rose by 2.4% and for other social security recipients by 2.5%, by comparison to the generic CPI rise of 2% in Adelaide and 2.1% nationally (ABS, 2017a, 2017c).

Figure 1: Increases in Living Costs March Qtr 2017



These overall figures can be disaggregated to track changes in the price of key basic goods and services in the last quarter both in Adelaide and nationally. These are shown in Table 1 over the page, but while the health and tobacco changes noted above had an impact on household budgets, the other results for the quarter were fairly stable.

Table 1: Cost of Living Changes March Qtr 2017 by Expenditure Type

Cost of Living Area	Adelaide CPI March Qtr change %	National CPI March Qtr change %	Adelaide CPI March 2016- March 2017 %	National CPI March 2016- March 2017 %
Food	-0.4	-0.2	2.0	1.8
Fruit and Vegetables	-3.0	-1.9	15.2	12.7
Housing	0.9	0.8	1.4	2.5
Rent	0.1	0.1	0.6	0.6
Utilities	3.3	2.2	2.7	4.3
• Electricity	5.9	2.5	12.7	7.5
• Water	0.0	0.0	-6.3	-1.8
• Gas	0.0	3.8	-10.0	2.7
Health	1.1	2.0	4.2	3.8
Transport	2.2	1.5	3.9	3.8
CPI All Groups	0.4	0.5	2.0	2.1

(Source: ABS, 2017c)

Incomes

Given that social security recipients have very low incomes, it is unlikely that any or any significant amount of the weekly benefit can be saved – at least for those not able to supplement their government payments with other incomes. For someone on the base level of benefits (with no rent assistance), and assuming that they spend all their income, SACOSS calculates that the dollar value changes in cost of living is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Cost of Living Changes March Qtr 2016 – March Qtr 2017

	Base Allowance + Supplements (31 Mar 16)	Selected Living Cost Index Change	Living Cost Change per week	Base Allowance + Supplements (31 Mar 17)	Change in Rates of Same Benefits	Net Result \$pw
Age Pensioner (Single)	\$436.95	2.4%	\$10.49	\$444.15	\$7.20	-\$3.29
Newstart with two FTB children	\$553.51	2.5%	\$13.84	\$562.17	\$8.66	-\$5.18

(Source: Calculated from data in Centrelink, 2016, 2017; ABS, 2017a.)

For details of calculation, see Explanatory Note 3 in the Appendix here)

That is to say, for those whose only source of income is a base-rate Age Pension (with the Energy Supplement) and who spend all their income, the cost of living over the last year increased by \$10.49 per week, while their income only rose by \$7.20 – so they are \$3.29 a week worse off than a year ago. For a single person on the base rate of Newstart with two children the situation is worse. Their cost of living last year went up by \$13.84 per week while their income increased by only \$8.66, leaving them \$5.18 a week worse off.

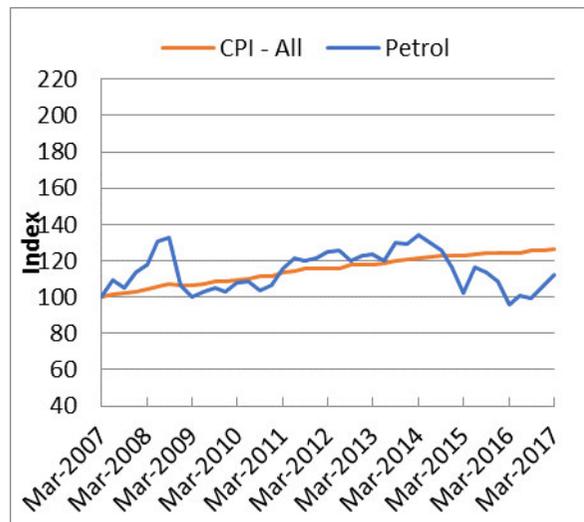
SECTION 2: Headline Items from March Quarter CPI

This section provides a snapshot of price movements in the three significant items in the CPI that have been in media headlines.

Petrol

Petrol prices grabbed the headlines with a 5.9% increase in the March Qtr making a 16.6% increase over the last year. But the long term data shows that over the last ten years petrol prices have increased by less than the general inflation rate.

Figure 2: Petrol Prices, March 2007-17

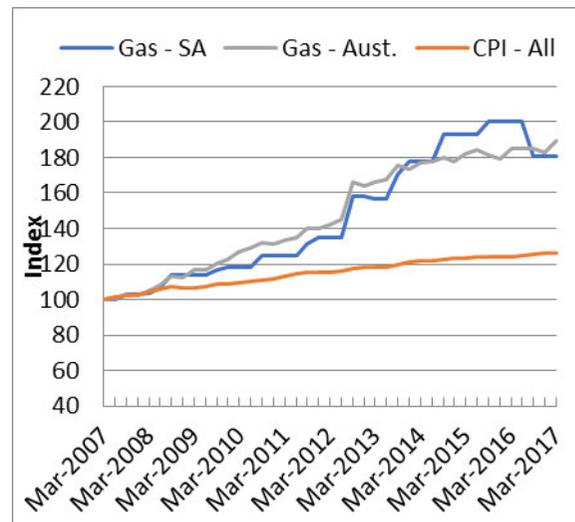


While petrol prices have not contributed to extra cost of living pressures over the longer term, the recent substantial rises coincided with cyclical increases in health prices and further increases energy costs will clearly create problems for low income households.

Gas

Gas has been in the media with local supply shortages amid export development and government interventions to limit exports and ensure stable supply for the local market. The extent of the increase in gas prices over the last decade is evident below.

Figure 3: Gas Prices, March 2007-17

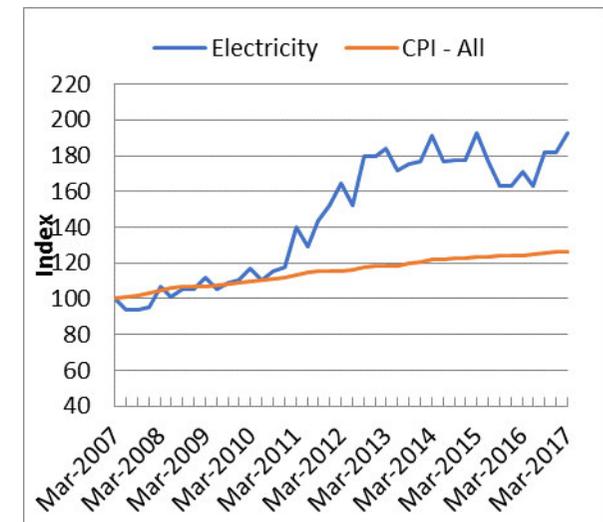


Gas prices are an important cost for many “dual fuel” households, especially for renters and those on low incomes who can’t replace gas appliances with cheaper solar technology. Gas price increases also feed into higher costs for many industries, including the cost of electricity.

Electricity

Electricity prices have dominated cost of living concerns over the last decade – and for good reason. Electricity prices have increased by more than any other commodity except tobacco over the last ten years – both in South Australia and nationally (SACOSS, 2016).

Figure 4: Electricity Prices, March 2007-17



Electricity price increases impact disproportionately on low income households. For this reason, SACOSS has been calling on the state government to review energy concessions and move to a percentage based concession to better assist those on low incomes.

APPENDIX: Explanatory Notes

1. CPI and Living Cost Indexes

The ABS Selected Living Cost Indexes uses a different methodology to the CPI in that the CPI is based on acquisition (i.e. the price at the time of acquisition of a product), while the living cost index is based on actual expenditure. This is particularly relevant in relation to housing costs where CPI traces changes in house prices, while the SLCI traces changes in the amount expended each week on housing (e.g. mortgage repayments). Further information is available in the Explanatory Notes to the Selected Living Cost Indexes (ABS, 2017b).

In that sense, the Selected Living Cost Indexes are not a simple disaggregation of CPI and the two are not strictly comparable. However, both indexes are used to measure changes in the cost of living over time (although that is not what CPI was designed for), and given the general usage of the CPI measure and its powerful political and economic status, it is useful to compare the two and highlight the differences for different household types.

2. Limitations of the Selected Living Cost Indexes

The Selected Living Cost Indexes are more nuanced than the generic CPI in that they measure changes for different household types, but there are still a number of problems with using those indexes to show cost of living changes faced by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in South Australia. While it is safe to assume that social security recipients are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, any household-based data for multi-person households says nothing about distribution of power, money and expenditure within a household and may therefore hide particular (and often gendered) structures of vulnerability and disadvantage. Further, the living cost indexes are not state-based, so particular South Australian trends or circumstances may not show up.

At the more technical level, the Selected Living Cost Indexes are for households whose *predominant income* is from the described source (e.g. aged pension or government transfers). However, the expenditures that formed the base data and weighting (from the *2009-10 Household Expenditure Survey*) add up to well over the actual social security payments available (even including other government payments like rent assistance, utilities allowance and family tax benefits). Clearly many households in these categories have other sources of income, or more than one social security recipient in the same household. Like the CPI, the Living Cost Index figures reflect broad averages (even if more nuanced), but do not reflect the experience of the poorest in those categories.

Another example of this “averaging problem” is that expenditures on some items, like housing, are too low to reflect the real expenditures and changes for the most vulnerable in the housing market – again, because the worst case scenarios are “averaged out” by those in the category with other resources. For instance, if one pensioner owned their own home outright they would generally be in a better financial position than a pensioner who has to pay market rents – but if the market rent were \$300 per week, the average expenditure on rent between the two would be \$150 per week, much less than what the renting pensioner was actually paying.

The weightings in the Selected Living Cost Indexes are also based on a set point in time (from the *2009-10 Household Expenditure Survey*) and can't be changed until the next survey. In the meantime, the price of some necessities may increase rapidly, forcing people to change

expenditure patterns to cover the increased cost. Alternatively or additionally, expenditure patterns may change for a variety of other reasons. However, the weighting in the indexes does not change and so does not track the expenditure substitutions and the impact that has on cost of living and lifestyle.

Finally, the Selected Living Cost Indexes' household income figures are based on households that are the average size for that household type: 1.52 people for the aged pensioners, and 2.57 for the other social security recipients (ABS, 2017b). This makes comparison with allowances difficult. This *Update* focuses on single person households or a single person with two children (to align to the other social security recipient household average of 2.57 persons). However, this is a proxy rather than statistical correlation.

It is inevitable that any summary measure will have limitations, and as noted in the main text, the Selected Living Cost Indexes provide a robust statistical base, a long time series, and quarterly tracking of changes in the cost of living which is somewhat sensitive to low income earners.

3. Income Support Payment Calculations – March 2017

Even using the base rate of benefits, the calculation of the relevant weekly incomes is difficult because of the complexity of the income support system which means that payment eligibility and rates change depending on the exact circumstances of the household (eg. age of children, assets). The calculation is also complex because of changes over time in eligibility and available benefits. However, based on an assumption of a single Aged Pensioner and a single Newstart recipient with two children (aged 10 and 14) – with neither receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance, the basic income supports payments are as follows:

Rates at 31 March 2016

	Base Rate	Pension Supplement	Household Assistance Package	FTB A Child u13	FTB A Child 13-15	FTB B	Pharmac Benefit	TOTAL PAYMENT
Aged Pension	\$397.40	32.50	7.05					\$436.95
Newstart - 2 children	\$285.40		4.75	89.88	116.97	53.41	3.1	\$553.51

Rates at 31 March 2017

	Base Rate	Pension Supplement	Household Assistance Package	FTB A Child u13	FTB A Child 13-15	FTB B	Pharmac Benefit	TOTAL PAYMENT
Aged Pension	\$404.15	32.95	7.05					\$444.15
Newstart - 2 children	\$289.65		4.75	91.42	118.93	54.32	3.1	\$562.17

Sources

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