



Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc.

Working for a fair and inclusive Northern Territory

NTCOSS Submission to the Northern Territory Utilities Commission: Re: '2014 Network Price Determination' PWC Regulatory Proposal

NTCOSS Submission to the Northern Territory Utilities Commission: October 2013

INTRODUCTION

NTCOSS is a peak body for the community sector in the NT and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. The community sector in the NT is made up of community managed, non-government, not for profit organisations who work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. The community sector plays a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians and in building safe and healthy communities by providing services that enable people to access and participate in health services, education, employment, economic development, and family and community life.

Access to utilities for Territorians is an issue which NTCOSS has highlighted in the past five years, since the significant electricity and water price rises were announced in early 2009 by the then Labor Government, and more recently in late 2012, when the current Government announced the most significant price rises in the Territory's recent history. More recently NTCOSS has released a Cost of Living (CoL) Report: ***"Tracking changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged Northern Territorians"***, (Issue No. 1, October 2013), which highlights a range of issues in relation to:

- The movement of utilities prices over the last 15 years in the Northern Territory
- The rapid increase in the consumer price index for utilities prices in the NT, when compared with the general CPI rate¹
- The average household expenditure for NT households on electricity, water & sewerage, and household gas
- The disproportionate impact that utilities price rises have on low income households in the NT

The ability to access affordable electricity and water services is critical to the health and wellbeing of all Territorians. NTCOSS is particularly concerned about low income and disadvantaged Territorians in this context.

Submissions into PWC's Regulatory Proposal re2014 Network Price Determination

NTCOSS therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide some input into this consultation process in relation to Power and Water Corporation's Regulatory Proposal, which details the expenditure that PWC believes it requires to operate its regulated networks prudently and efficiently for the next regulatory control period, 2014-19, as well as how the required revenue will be collected via network tariffs.

NTCOSS appreciates the complex nature of the development of appropriate price regulation methodology to apply for the five year period from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019, and the range of stakeholder input which

¹ Use of Darwin CPI with NT figures: State CPI figures are not available through the ABS, Darwin CPI figures are used to calculate current expenditure figures from the 2009-10 HES Expenditure Data. Given the relatively similar expenditure figures for Darwin and the NT as a whole, use of the Darwin CPI provides a fairly accurate basis for deriving the figures.

require consideration. We also appreciate the need to adopt where possible, the approach used by the Australian Energy Regulator and the application of relevant parts of the National Electricity Rules in that are consistent with the NT specific legislation, and the various constraints which impinge on the Territory.

NTCOSS Cost of Living Report Findings:

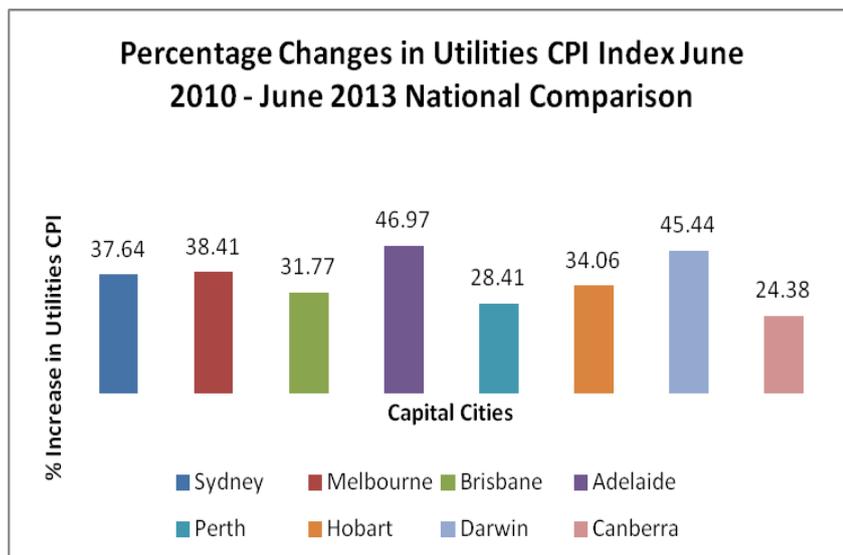
The overwhelming conclusions from the data contained in the recent CoL report is that

- Households in the NT have consistently had the highest expenditure on electricity in the country (last 15 yrs)
- Households in the NT now have the 3rd highest expenditure on water in the country
- Utilities prices in Darwin are rising much faster than the general inflation rate
- Territory households are now spending an average \$187 per quarter more on utilities, than they were a year ago – that’s \$748 per year extra (see Table 6 in Cost of Living Report)
- Utilities prices hit lowest income households the hardest – who have the least ability to pay; and
- Poorer households spend proportionately more of their incomes on utilities than richer households.

Cost of Living pressures on Low Income Households in the NT

Residents of the Northern Territory face well documented high costs of living, in terms of housing, food, and transport. Up until 2009, the NT residents enjoyed some of the lowest utilities prices in the country but over recent years prices have continued to rise, with a 45% increase in utilities over the last 3 years alone – see Figure 1 Utilities price rises in Darwin have risen faster than all other capital cities, bar Adelaide. In terms of electricity prices specifically, prices have risen by 40.1% at during the same period – see Figure 2. However at the same time the general CPI for Darwin has only risen by 8.7% over the same period.

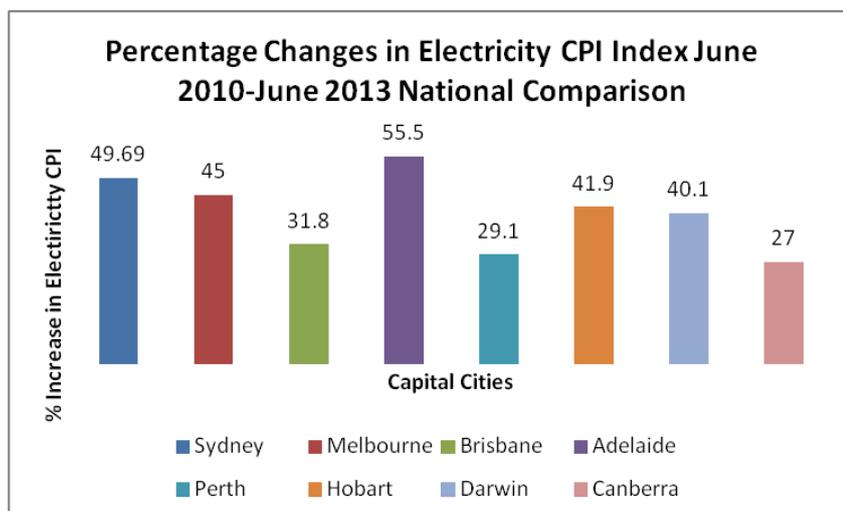
Figure 1: Comparison of Percentage Changes in Utilities CPI Index in Capital Cities June 2010 - June 2013²



Source: Figures derived from ABS (2013d Table 13, Data 4)

²“Tracking changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged Northern Territorians”, (Issue No. 1, October 2013) (Figure 6)
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**Figure 2: Comparison of Percentage Changes in Utilities CPI Index in Capital Cities
June 2010 - June 2013**



Source: Figures derived from ABS (2013d Table 13, Data 1-5)

The price rises have been dramatic in recent years, however, prices have been rising over the 15 years at a rate twice that of the general inflation rate – see Table 1.

Table 1: CPI increases for Utilities over the last 15 years, Darwin³

	% Increase Sept 1998-June 2013
Electricity	107.6
Gas	98.9
Water	159.70
Utilities	118.5
CPI – All Groups	51.8

Source: ABS (2013d Table 13, Data 4)

Former and current NT Governments have, in some ways, recognized cost of living pressures on low income households brought about by utilities price rises. In 2009, the former NT Government altered the Northern Territory Pensioner and Carer Concession scheme to protect pensioners and carers from the then price rises. And more recently, the current Government reduced the severity of the initial price rise introduced in January 2013. But despite such measures, expenditure on utilities by Territorian households continues to rise.

PWC Regulatory Proposal

NTCOSS has looked at the Power and Water Corporation's (PWC) 2014 Network Price Determination, Initial Regulatory Proposal (1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019) as well as the Power Networks *Network Pricing Principles Statement and Pricing Proposal*, for the regulatory control period from 1 July 2014-30 June 2019, submitted to the Utilities Commission in September 2013.

³ Ibid (Table 5)

NTCOSS is greatly concerned about the possible ramifications of the PWC recommendation to the Utilities commission, that there be a 58% increase in the Network charge to retailers (see Table 2), to keep the utility commercially viable. Given that the network charge makes up between 25% -30% of the charges on a household’s bill, if some part or all of this charge is passed on to the customer, it would cause significant hardship to low income and disadvantaged Territorians.

Table 2 – Excerpt from Power Networks, *Network Pricing Principles Statement and Pricing Proposal*, Table 16 Proposed Domestic Tariff in 2014/15 (GST exclusive), (p 30)

The resulting network tariffs for 2014/15 are described in the following sections 8.3.1 to 8.3.5 and Attachments 4 and 5.

8.3.1 Proposed Domestic tariff in 2014/15

The proposed domestic tariff for 2014/15 and the change in each charging component from 2013/14 is shown in Table 16.

Table 16 – Proposed Domestic tariff in 2014/15 (GST exclusive)

Tariff component	2013/14	2014/15	Price change
System Availability Charge c/day	27.998	44.279	58.1%
First 500 kWh per month c/kWh	9.653	15.266	58.1%
Next 500 kWh per month c/kWh	9.653	15.266	58.1%
Energy used above 1,000 kWh per month c/kWh	7.826	12.377	58.1%

The PWC’s 2014 Network Price Determination, Initial Regulatory Proposal (1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019, p.27)) refers to the fact that in order to meet stakeholder expectations (for 2014-19), “proposed forecast expenditures have been kept to a minimum and their prudence and efficiency demonstrated” which will “minimize the increase in prices to Power Network’s customers.”, also refers to their being “No Impact” on Residential and Small commercial Pricing Order Customers (Table 45, Customer impacts, p.145).

However, NTCOSS remains unclear how a 58% network charge increase could be totally absorbed by electricity retailers without there being significant price pressure internally. We are particularly concerned that ultimately a proportion this increase (25-30%) would end up being passed on to consumers – causing further hardship for struggling low income and disadvantaged households in the NT. (See calculations done in Table 3). Even if a smaller portion than 25% of the network charge was passed to customers, it would create hardship for a large number of Territorian households.

Table 3 – Change in electricity bills if a 25% of a 58% network charge increase was passed on to households

Household/Family Type – Three examples provided (sample kWh/yr usage)	Current electricity bill (approx) \$ per year	With 58 per cent increase on the network charge (14.5% bill increase) \$ per year (what bill would be)	Approximate difference in bill if network charge passed on* \$ per year	Existing price rise for households since January 2013 \$ per year
Small Family (2 adults only) @ 7,500 kWh/yr	\$1985	\$2275	\$290	\$315
Average Family (Alice Springs) @ 8,500 kWh/yr ⁴	\$2370	\$2713	\$343	\$375
Larger family (two adults plus kids) with high usage @ 15,000 kWh/yr	\$3930	\$4500	\$570	\$630

**Increase based on 25% of the 58% increase in the network charge being passed on*

Over the last year, utilities bills for families in the NT already went up, on average, **\$187 comparing the June 2013 quarter with the June 2012 quarter** (see Table 4), which extended over 4 quarters. This equates to an increase of around **\$748 per year for Territory families**. Another \$315 per year for a small family, or up to \$630 for a large family with high usage, would place a significant financial burden on many Territory households.

Table 4: Utilities increases over the last year, Northern Territory⁵

<i>(NT 2009/10 base figure \$)</i>	NT Estimated Average Weekly Expend \$ June 2012	CPI Increase Darwin for each utility % (June 2012- June 2013)	NT Estimated Current Average Weekly Expend \$ June 2013	Increased expenditure per week \$ in past year	Increased expenditure for whole quarter (13 weeks) \$	Actual expenditure for whole quarter (13 weeks) \$
Electricity (33.15)	35.60	30.6	46.40	10.80	140.40	603.20
Gas: Bottled and Mains (1.59)	1.68	12.4	1.89	0.21	2.73	24.57
Water & Sewerage (9.28)	12.40	27.3	15.80	3.40	44.20	205.40
Totals	49.68	-	64.09	14.41	187.33	833.17

*Source: Derived from (ABS 2011b Table 27A; ABS 2013d Table 13, Data 4) NOTE: Darwin CPI used as state CPI figure not available in ABS data
See Technical note 4 re use of Darwin CPI with NT figures (NOTE: Not all households use gas)*

⁴ Information from Online Fact Sheet <http://www.alicesolarcity.com.au/facts/solar>

⁵ Tracking changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged Northern Territorians", (Issue No. 1, October 2013) (Table 6)
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Utilities Expenditure as a Proportion of Income – Lowest to Highest Income Quintiles

Lower income households (the bottom two quintiles) clearly spend more on utilities as a proportion of their income than the average or higher income households – see Table 5. Therefore any further price increases are going to be particularly felt by lower income households, in the bottom two quintiles.

Table 5: Utilities Expenditure by Household Type, Northern Territory (2009-10)⁶

	Domestic Fuel & Power (NT) 2009-10		Water (National*) 2009-10	
	Av. Weekly Expend \$	% of H/hold Expend	Av. Weekly Expend \$	% of H/hold Expend
<i>Note: Domestic fuel & power not disaggregated</i>				
Lowest Income Quintile	15.51	3.00	4.89	0.87
Second Income Quintile	27.13	3.30	6.32	0.78
Third Income Quintile	36.06	2.53	7.97	0.68
Fourth Income Quintile	40.07	2.46	9.53	0.64
Highest Income Quintile	42.67	1.93	12.26	0.57
All households	35.19	2.35	8.19	0.66

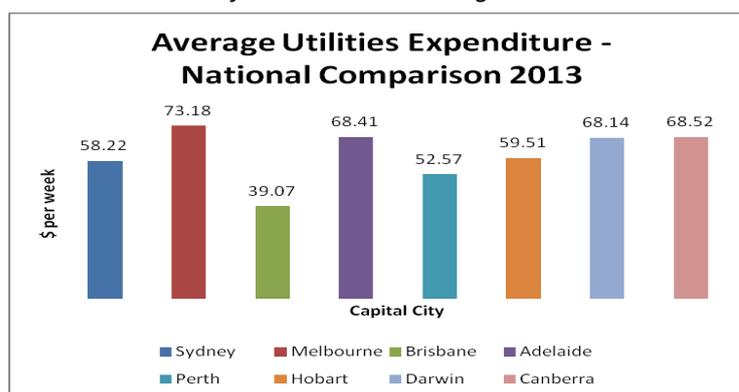
Source: Domestic Fuel & Power figures taken from 2011c (Table 3);

National figures are used for the breakdown of figures water and sewerage, as not available at the state level

Note: The Expend figures have not been indexed to reflect 2013 expenditure and the % of H/hold Expend do not need adjusting for currency

With Darwin's average expenditure on utilities on a par with the highest expenditure in the country (compared with Melbourne \$73.18 per week; Canberra \$68.52; Adelaide \$68.41; Sydney \$58.22; Perth \$52.57; Hobart \$59.51; Brisbane \$39.07) reflective of the general high costs of living in Darwin and the Northern Territory, households can ill afford another increase in the cost of living (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Comparison of Electricity, Gas, Water & Sewerage Expenditure in Capital Cities 2013⁷
Indexed from 2009-10 HES Figures



All figures derived from ABS (2011b Table23A); and ABS (2013d Table 13, Data 4)

⁶ Ibid (Table 4)

⁷ Ibid (Figure 5d)

The PWC 2014 Network Price Determination, Initial Regulatory Proposal (1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019, p.45) makes reference to the positive economic outlook for the Northern Territory (p.45), and the fact that “*With the Northern Territory’s resources boom now in full swing, the overall outlook is for strong wage growth in the near term as the resources boom puts upward pressure on wage negotiations both directly and indirectly. The utilities and professional services sectors are estimated to be currently experiencing wage growth in the order of one percentage point higher than the Territory average...*” (p.56). However, this wage growth does not extend to all Territorians, particularly those on low incomes, who will continue to struggle with existing electricity prices, let alone if there is another significant increase in the future.

The PWC 2014 Network Price Determination, Initial Regulatory Proposal (1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019, p.48), highlights the fact that “The number of solar PV installations connected to the network is rapidly increasing...These installations are predominantly at domestic and small commercial premises”. The growth in installations in recent years is certainly encouraging, but these installations are not occurring amongst low income households, so the efficiency gains are being made by middle and high income earners, which is bringing down the cost of their electricity bills. However, low income households simply do not have the financial means to make large capital purchases such as for solar PV, and therefore miss out on such opportunities to make savings on their bills. It is imperative that the Northern Territory finds creative solutions to make energy efficiency measures more accessible to low income households (See Recommendation 1 from NTCOSS Cost of Living Report, below).

Cost Reflective Pricing

The Power Networks *Network Pricing Principles Statement and Pricing Proposal* highlights the emphasis which reports by the AEMC, the Productivity commission and the Australian Government’s White Paper all make on the need for reform of distribution network tariffs - with an emphasis on a range of areas including “enhancing cost reflectivity...improving demand side participation and energy efficiency and rolling out smart meters and time based pricing, to reduce demand in peak periods.

There is specific mention in the Power Networks *Network Pricing Principles Statement and Pricing Proposal* of ‘cost reflective pricing’ in the context of the potential roll out of interval meters in the Northern Territory.

Learning lessons from other jurisdictions in relation to cost reflective pricing

The Victorian council of Social Service (VCOSS) has been involved in a Customer Impact Study with regard to Time of Use (ToU) tariffs. Verbal and written feedback has been received from VCOSS⁸ in relation to the following:

The analyses in the Customer Impact Study were based on a number of hypothetical ToU tariffs. The study also shows that small variations in the relative unit costs for the different time periods, and the times they apply for, can have a significant impact on final bills. So while generalisations can be made based on typical tariffs, they are not necessarily applicable in all cases. Providing customers with tools to help them

⁸ Email and phone correspondence between NTCOSS and VCOSS, 2013

understand how the actual ToU tariffs apply(ied) to their actual usage patterns, will end up costing them, is critical.

Stage 1 of the Customer Impact Study Identifies vulnerable groups and assesses impacts of a range of different types of ToU tariffs compared to a baseline flat tariff.⁹

Stage 2 used a ToU tariff more similar to the ones expected to be offered, did the range analysis, and also reported on focus group interviews.¹⁰ Significantly: “Stage 2 also refined the findings of stage 1 on the impacts on customers’ bills and found that the average impacts on bills across customer groups for the scenarios studied would range between a reduction of 6.1% (assuming a response to the price signals) and an increase of 1.8% across customer groups (assuming no response to the price signals). The study also found that, for a small number of customers, there was the potential for a significant increase in bills. This finding supports the decision to make flexible pricing optional with customers having the right to stay on their existing plans if that makes most sense for them.”

Impact on seniors in Victoria - Feedback from VCOSS experience

With regard to the impact on older people of flexible pricing, this was one group that was singled out in the customer impact study as a potentially vulnerable group.

Dual Fuel Seniors Households:

- The study found that typical senior(s) dual-fuel households would be very slightly worse off (around 1% bill increase) if they did not respond to price and better off (by about 2%) if they did respond to price (*Those with off-peak controlled loads (typically hot water and slab heating) already have a load profile biased toward off-peak times.*).
- The range analysis shows that 25% may be more than 20% worse off, and 5% more than 30% worse off. There were similar numbers for the same amounts better off. (So 30% of households were significantly worse off)

Single Fuel (all electric) Seniors Households:

- Single fuel (all electric) senior(s) households were much more likely to come out neutral or better off. The average single fuel (all electric) senior(s) household was better off by about 2%, even without responding to the price signal.
- All said, the bill impacts on seniors households across the range of different ToU tariffs modelled mirror the impacts on all residential households, though potential bill increases are lower (while the potential bill savings are similar).

⁹ Stage 1 Customer Impact Study Vol 1 http://www.smartmeters.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/154794/CIS-Final-report-18-Oct-Volume-1.pdf

Stage 1: Customer Impact Study Vol 2 http://www.smartmeters.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/154797/CIS-Final-report-18-Oct-Volume-2.pdf

Note Volume 2 contains the more detailed calculations etc

¹⁰ Stage 2: Customer Impact Study2: http://www.smartmeters.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/163855/AMI-Customer-Impact-Stage-2.pdf

National Council On The Ageing (COTA): Impact of Cost Reflective Pricing on Seniors

In addition, the National Council On The Ageing (COTA), in their 2012 Submission to the Senate Select Committee into Electricity Prices¹¹, expressed concerns about the implications of such measures as peak pricing and time of use tariffs. They believe that such measures will do little to alleviate energy poverty experienced by many older consumers. Rather, peak pricing has the potential to disproportionately affect consumers who cannot shift their load due to age or health related factors.¹²

Attempts to limit peak load at the household level have the potential to cause older people to increase their focus on 'energy conserving' rather than 'energy efficient'. This response may have other undesirable consequences. For example, by choosing not to use air conditioning on hot days individuals can experience significant health problems which will, in turn, put pressure on health and emergency services during extreme weather events. "In brief, COTA believes that, to be effective for older people, energy reduction schemes need to focus on energy cost savings for households, rather than energy savings in terms of kWh."¹³

Specific issues affecting older consumers of electricity

"Older people represent a unique segment of the electricity market by virtue of their patterns of usage and household budgeting habits. In brief, older consumers are more likely to display the following characteristics:

- more likely to spend considerable amount of their time in their own homes and be reliant on their residential energy supply to meet the majority of their energy needs (unlike people who spent parts of their day in a work or school environment);
- more likely to suffer from chronic conditions which may intensify their reliance on electricity (for example, to maintain life support equipment or to assist them with temperature regulation or to charge electric mobility devices);
- more likely to forgo other consumption or activities in order to pay their energy bills on time and in full;
- likely to experience significant hardship in their efforts to meet the rising cost of energy which have increased disproportionately to their fixed incomes;
- less likely to apply for available energy rebates or concessions being unaware of their entitlement or believing that others have a greater need; and
- less likely to be able to take advantage of solar generation opportunities because of the high cost of infrastructure."¹⁴

While there have been energy saving schemes available in parts of the Northern Territory, low income households 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 accommodation often face poor thermal efficiency in their homes, and there is little incentive for landlords to

¹¹ COTA 2012, *Submission to Senate Select Committee into Electricity Prices, September 2012*

¹² *Ibid*, p.6

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 6

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.3

make energy efficiency related improvements. NTCOSS is pleased that there are now 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 – and believe that further steps can be taken.

Any discussion about movement towards cost reflective pricing measures in the Northern Territory must take consideration of the needs of low income and disadvantage groups, such as seniors (especially those in dual fuel households), and those in rental accommodation. Measures addressing the barriers to improving energy efficiency for particular households must be developed. NTCOSS makes some recommendations in its Cost of Living Report, in relation to these issues.

Recommendation 1 from NTCOSS Cost of Living Report

1. Provide mechanisms to enable low income households to improve energy and water efficiency. This could take a number of forms and include initiatives such as:

- Incentives for private and public housing landlords to improve energy and water efficiency; and
- The establishment of low-interest loans and/or more rebates for solar power, solar hot water - which need to be targeted in a way to be accessible to low income households.
- Access to information, education and workshops to enable households to take control of their energy and water usage, including increasing the ability of tenants to advocate to landlords to report damage that may contribute to higher living costs. This could also include education for landlords.

NTCOSS is also concerned about the impact that the splitting up of PWC and encouraging competition will have on low income and vulnerable households, particularly households in remote and very remote areas of the NT, and NTCOSS is concerned about the impact on prices if privatisation is the end result of this process. Privatisation in other states, for example in South Australia (1999), has led to higher electricity prices for households, with the CPI for electricity rising 175% in Adelaide since 2000.

NTCOSS has also noted concerns expressed by the Electrical Trade Union (Queensland & NT) in relation to the issue of splitting up Power and Water. The ETU have expressed concern that the review of the PWC is clearly geared towards the privatisation of power and water. The Union Organiser, Paul Kirby stated that “It is extremely concerning for the union and it should be extremely concerning for the public, given that there is still a lot of debate to be had about whether this is cheaper in any way, shape or form and that splitting the market up is certainly the first step in full privatisation” (ABC Radio, 22¹⁵ October 2013). The concerns of the ETU reinforce the need for a consumer voice in this debate.

Consumer Advocacy

NTCOSS therefore believes that it is critical, if disaggregation occurs, that resourcing of consumer advocacy be put in place to ensure the necessary consumer protections accompany any such changes. All jurisdictions – bar the NT and WA – are part of the National Energy Market (NEM), and subject to the National Energy

¹⁵ ABC Radio News, NT, 22 October 2013

Customer Framework (NECF). Under the NECF¹⁶, residential (and small business) energy customers are supported by a range of robust customer protections including

- *Guaranteed access* to an offer of supply for electricity and gas;
- *A customer hardship regime*, requiring retailers to develop customer hardship policies that must be approved by the AER, with certain prescribed elements to assist residential customers experiencing longer-term payment difficulties;
- *Limitations on disconnection*, including processes to follow, restrictions on when disconnections can occur, additional protections for customers experiencing hardship for financial difficulty and a prohibition on disconnecting premises where life support equipment is required;
- *Mandatory minimum terms and conditions* for retail and connection contracts for residential customers
- *Energy marketing rules* that build on the requirements set out in the Australian Consumer Law to ensure customers receive full information before they enter an energy contract, and ensuring retailers are held accountable for marketing that is conducted on their behalf.

Residents of the NT should be able to expect at least the same protections as those in other States, the majority of whom have funded consumer advocacy in place. The PWC's 2014 Network Price Determination, Initial Regulatory Proposal (1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019, (p.22) makes reference to the need for 'improved Engagement with the Wider Community', and the establishment of strong consumer advocacy presence in the NT would also assist in working towards this aim.

Recommendation 5 from NTCOSS Cost of Living Report

5. Consumer Advocacy resourced in the NT. If disaggregation occurs as a result of Government decisions around the splitting up of the Power and Water corporation, funding for consumer advocacy must be established to ensure the necessary consumer protections are put in place to accompany such reforms. Such advocacy would include incorporating consumer perspectives on network price determinations (transmission and distribution), and consumer engagement in the power of choice recommendations relating to the introduction of smart meters, amongst other measures, to find the best solutions for the Northern Territory. The electricity industry is well resourced to provide their perspective on the myriad of issues in the energy space, but it can be easy for consumer interests to be overlooked. The consumer must have a legitimate voice.

¹⁶ <http://www.scer.gov.au/workstreams/energy-market-reform/national-energy-customer-framework/>

CONCLUSION

NTCOSS urges the Northern Territory Utilities Commission to consider the ramifications of any network charge price increase on low income and disadvantaged Territorians. With cost of living pressures already high for many Territorians, a further price rise to an essential service, will impact significantly on many households in the NT.

NTCOSS values the opportunity to provide some input into this submission and looks forward to the Commission's 'Draft Determination' to be released for further consultation in December 2013, and the 'Final Determination', to be made in April 2014.

Some of the issues highlighted may be outside of the capacity of the current Utilities Commission review but we highlight these issues here in the hope that they can be brought to the attention of other decision makers, and inform the discussion and debate around these significant issues.

NTCOSS, October 2013

Attachment:

Tracking changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged Northern Territorians, (Issue No. 1, October 2013)