



Submission to Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices

**Prepared by
COTA Australia**

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About COTA Australia

COTA Australia is the peak body representing the almost nine million Australians over 50. For over 70 years our systemic advocacy has been improving the diverse lives of older people in policy areas such as health, retirement incomes, and more. Our broad agenda is focussed on tackling ageism, respecting diversity, and the empowerment of older people to live life to the full.

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Introduction

COTA Australia welcomes the Senate Select Committee's investigation into the price setting practices and market power of major supermarkets (Supermarket Prices inquiry). From a consumer perspective, this inquiry is crucial.

The growing affordability challenges faced by increasing numbers of households across Australia are impacting their supermarket purchasing decisions – especially about the types and quantities of food. As one person shared,

We're pensioners. Keeping a roof over our head and utilities connected are the priority. Forced to eat smaller and less meals daily¹.(survey respondent, COTA Australia Supermarket Prices Survey January 2024)

Most older Australians believe the big supermarket chains are unreasonably increasing their profit margins while consumers are facing steep rises in food and grocery costs.

Many older people share the view while current prices are affecting most households, it is people on lower fixed incomes and/or living outside cities or large regional centres who are being hardest hit by rising food and grocery prices.

The focus of our submission

The Supermarket Prices inquiry's terms of reference are broad ranging and seek to investigate various aspects of and repercussions linked to rising supermarket prices. We felt that the best contribution we could make to the Inquiry's deliberations is to inform you of the way pricing and other practices are impacting on older Australians and share their thoughts on the matters being investigated. As a result, the focus of our submission is amplifying the voices of older Australia specifically in relation to the following Terms of Reference:

- c) rising supermarket profits and the large increase in price of essential items;
- d) the prevalence of opportunistic pricing, price mark-ups and discounts that are not discounts;
- g) improvements to the regulatory framework to deliver lower prices for food and groceries;
- j) any other related matters.

In addressing these Terms of Reference our Submission highlights:

1. the various impacts food and grocery prices are having on their lives financially and emotionally

¹ Within this submission, italics are used to signify the voice (direct quotation) of a person aged 50 years and over.

2. changes they are making to their everyday living (including nutrition) and expectations about quality of life to better manage the impacts of rising supermarket prices
3. practical ways they believe the *issue* of supermarket prices can be addressed

In January 2024, COTA Australia conducted a survey (COTA Australia Supermarket Prices Survey, January 2024)² to capture the lived experiences and views on supermarket pricing practices. We received over 1,400 survey and 28 written responses which have been used to inform this submission. A survey report will be published independently.

Further, the submission, responding to the Terms of Reference, also highlights the perception of discounting amongst older people we engage with and the place of technology.

Background

In our [submission](#) to the Australia Senate Select Committee on Cost of Living in March 2023, we highlighted the challenges older households faced (and continue to face) in coping with spiralling living costs. [Our submission](#) evidenced that, while most people aged 50 years and older were grappling to keep up with rising living costs and maintain a reasonable quality of life, those on low to modest fixed incomes – especially if renting – were being severely hit. With limited financial resources they were, and continue to be, susceptible to bearing the impacts of the nation’s inflation burden. Many told us of the difficult purchase/payment decisions and trade-offs they are compelled to make to meet household bills, afford everyday necessities such as food and transport and if possible, maintain health and wellbeing. We heard of many instances where people were forgoing health and dental appointments, limiting or stopping medications, delaying needed house repairs and/or living with the ever-present fear of being evicted.

Even though economists and politicians advise inflation is now slowly trending in the right direction and the Australian economy, despite many uncertainties in the global economy, is comparatively buoyant, food and grocery prices remain high. As the [Foodbank Hunger Report \(September 2023\)](#) found 3.7 million Australian households experienced food insecurity in the last 12 months, many for the first time. As highlighted in our March 2023 submission, the Hunger Report identified **food and grocery prices** (followed by energy and housing) as the **key reason why food insecure households struggled** to afford food amongst other living expenses in the last 12 months.

Anyone who shops knows, over the past two years prices for food and grocery items have surged. Even though various media channels spruik that as 2024 unfolds Australians are

²COTA Australia Supermarket Prices Survey, January 2024, survey report not yet published.

experiencing some ease in cost-of-living pressures across inflation and interest rates, the same **is not being said about the prices of essential food and groceries.**

From our discussions with older Australians, we know supermarket prices have evolved into a critical issue, if not the critical issue, for most Australian households with those on low to moderate incomes being, again, majorly affected. Our January survey³ found that for over **92% of respondent households** supermarket prices is a regular, if not burning, topic of conversation. Plus, 90% of respondents indicated food and grocery price increases were affecting their fortnightly shop and financial planning with 66% saying this was impacting adversely on their psychological and emotional health

Views people shared with us through our survey and written responses

- *Some of us don't have the privilege of chasing bargains! We go to the nearest supermarket and pay whatever the cost is because we are physically weaker, and the number of visits has reduced to once a fortnight or monthly. We are not going back to pick up a bargain. This is what is happening in our lives. Old age is only for the rich!!*
- *I have calculated if I had not changed brands, bought reduced items, cut out certain items, my weekly shopping would be costing about 40% more than 6-12 mths ago. I start my shop at Aldi but am finding that either Aldi prices have increased, or the other 2 supermarkets have dropped prices to match Aldi... Competition doesn't lower prices & my savings are fast disappearing.*
- *The supermarket chiefs email us that they are not profiteering from food inflation but doing everything they can to absorb some of the higher costs. I was almost won over. Then we read in the '23 FY, the Woolworths Group in Australia made a net after tax net profit of \$1.72 billion (Aus) – a whopping increase from the previous year. What can we do? We maybe old, but we need to eat. Woolworths and Coles dominate the country's food market. That's a problem!*
- *Over the past 4 -5 decades, it never been harder to put a nutritious meal on the table.*
- *When it's a challenge to put food on the table the prices charged at supermarkets are a hot issue. We used to buy everything for \$190 before CO-19 now it costs \$260-\$300.*
- *The current Investigation ... major Rort going on in W/Wth' in particular. ... I'm 78 now but had almost 30 years as Senior account Manager with 2 major international food companies. I have noticed (particularly over the last 12 months) the 'shrink flation' of a huge number of products ... The one standout ... that's really roused the beast is BEGA CHEESE packs of 36 cheese*

³ibid.

slices! ... The cheese is cut so thinly sliced now it's almost impossible to separate the cheese even with a knife!

- *Prices are exorbitant with some fruit and vege ... only seriously wealthy people can afford the produce ... I neither partake of alcohol/drugs or smoke and am on a part pension. I just manage after 27 years of part time work and saving. I don' know how others on pensions in private rental manage.*
- *Weekly 'Specials' need to be aimed at food, hygiene products and baby care not seventeen different brands of vitamin supplements as Woolworths has recently done. Feeding a family with nourishing affordable food is an absolute priority.*

Key messages to the Select Committee

Profit is fine as long as it's fair, transparent and justifiable

Most older Australians believe supermarkets – including Coles and Woolworths – are entitled to make a profit as are their shareholders. However, they are equally clear that profit should not be achieved at the expense of primary producers, consumers and/or the natural environment. As January survey respondent said,

As we are told in the emails from Coles, we're in this together (written submission)

Older Australians appreciate there are costs associated with doing business and, due to a wide range of factors (political, environmental etc), these have increased post COVID. They also do not debate such cost increases are highly likely to impact the price consumers need to pay at the point of sale. However, in relation to current supermarket food and grocery prices increases what older people find objectionable is:

- the market environment in which the big operators – that, is primarily Coles and Woolworths who control about two thirds of the market – are empowered to maximise profit margins by locking out competition, negotiating one-sided contracts at the farm gate and manipulating the price consumers pay for food and grocery items
- There is an ongoing perception that the big supermarket chains are colluding to lock in mutually opportunistic pricing, especially with regards to the types and timing of price mark-ups, discounts etc. – as one person said,

it is as if they are intimate partners in an exclusive game of win-win at the expense of consumers and farmers. They're so tight the rest of us have not a cat in hell's chance (survey respondent)

- the lack of scrutiny and transparency supermarkets face in setting their prices with codes of conduct being voluntary rather than mandatory.

Views shared with us from through the survey and written responses about supermarket pricing practices include:

- *These giant grocery stores know that we must eat and as such they have been allowed to become a law unto themselves and knowing this they work hand in hand to increase prices to suit their huge profit margins ..., and we ... to keep food on the table have no say or control in their grab for and holding of a lion's share of the grocery market.*
- *Having spent in excess of 20 years selling to the Australian Supermarket Industry, I can assure you that the only interest of the big players in this market is to increase their margins of profit. As an example, the weekly "Specials" advertised by the big retailers are supported entirely by markdowns provided by their suppliers. Further, if a supplier fails to support these markdowns, they are either not listed for stocking or are discontinued as suppliers.*
- *It all has to do with greed at the top affecting what we can afford, and what is available to us.*
- *I do not see the justification for the huge increases. Maybe transport costs? Wages ...? But it does suggest a certain level of taking advantage of the current economic situation.*
- *we feel we are at the mercy of the supermarkets who care very little about us. Depressing to get emails from the GM of Woolworths saying how they are helping but at the same time their profits are going up - the 2 don't match. Have always shopped at Australian stores but feel they are taking advantage of us ...*
- *Don't complain about a company making a 'honest profit.' But there is obviously insufficient competitiveness in the retail food market to force Woolworths and Coles to pass on the low prices they are receiving from the farmers in particular. There is also probably some form of collusion between them in pricing these commodities to keep pricing high and maximise margins. There is no point in moralising to private companies whose function is to maximise profits to the benefit of shareholders rather than passing on saving to customers or negotiate with farmers more fairly.*

Prices do matter

People aged 50 years and older believe the prices of food and grocery products are rising at a rate and pace that in no way parallels the increases (over the same period) to household

incomes. Our January survey⁴ found many respondents are now having to cut back sharply on overall spending and they cite **the price of food and grocery items as a major reason**.

Regardless of a household's level of income, the proportion which is needed to finance the regular supermarket shop is growing exponentially, and this is not without consequence. For increasing numbers of older people, the ongoing rise in prices means a constant re-evaluation of the household shopping budget to determine what is affordable and, what (although needed) could be considered as discretionary purchases.

As one person shared,

Supposedly we are not in recession, but now most weeks it surely feels like it and this feeling grows when I look at our main meal for the day. Where's the meat? The fish? The fresh vegies?

In our January survey older Australian's have shared how the significantly higher cost (compared to 2 to 3 years ago) of their regular food and grocery shop is impacting conspicuously on how they live their lives.

The principal concerns **older Australians want the Select Committee to hear** is these price increases are:

- further straining already tight budgets
- intensifying fears about purchasing power being progressively eroded
- deepening a sense of despondency about maintaining health and wellbeing
- raising feelings of never again being able to experience the quality of life once taken for granted
- strengthening scepticism about the prospect of returning to a more stable financial position over the coming 12 to 18 months even if the pace of inflation were to slow down
- limiting their ability to support family members and friends struggling to meet their financial commitments while getting less and less for the same level of expenditure, particularly referencing housing and educational costs.
- increasing mistrust in regulatory institutions being able to enforce relevant legislation and/or champion consumer rights by taking appropriate action when they are, or at risk of, being compromised

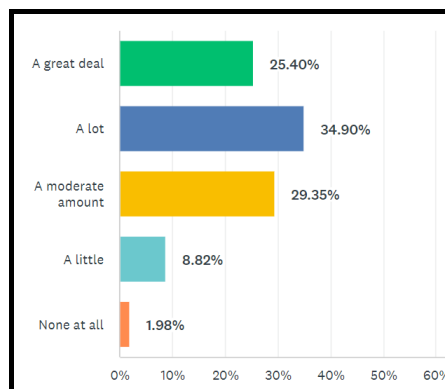
Older Australians are keen for the Select Committee to understand that while the effects of the food and grocery price increases are being felt widely, they are **being experienced**

⁴ ibid

disproportionately across Australia by lower income households, especially those who are renting or have a large mortgage and/or living outside cities and large regional centres.

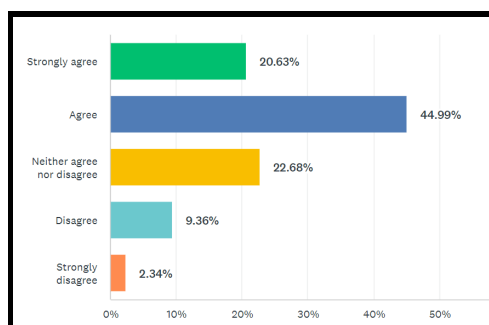
COTA Australia’s January 2024 survey found that 90% of respondents indicated food and grocery price increases were affecting their fortnightly shop and financial planning with 66% saying this was impacting adversely on their psychological and emotional health.

Table 1: Rising food & grocery prices impact on households’ fortnightly budget/financial planning.



Source: COTA Australia Supermarket Prices Survey, January 2024

Table 2: Extent of agreement with statement- rising cost of food and groceries has had psychological and emotional impacts - for example, it has increased my stress and/or anxiety levels.



Source: COTA Australia Supermarket Prices Survey, January 2024

The era of Australia being the *luck country* and the place of the *fair go* is vanishing. COTA’s most recent State of the Older Nation (SOTON)⁵ found older Australians are increasingly feeling like things are getting worse for them, fewer feel financially secure (30% rated their financial situation as ‘poorly’), and more are reporting difficulties accessing health services.

⁵ Council on the Ageing, State of the (Older) Nation: A Nationally Representative Survey Prepared by the Council on the Ageing (Report, June 2023). Accessible at: [State of the \(Older\) Nation - COTA Australia](#)

Of those feeling less optimistic about the future they were more likely to be aged 50-59, experiencing a difficulty with finances, living in rental accommodation and/or have a disability.

High supermarket prices necessitate lifestyle changes

The increase in food and grocery costs are changing how people aged 50 years and older live their lives. In our January survey approximately 80% of respondents said they have had to **make major lifestyle changes** to better manage the increased cost of food and groceries. For some respondents this has been an unwelcomed new experience. For others keeping a careful watch over the fortnightly budget has become a more exacting exercise.

Views shared with us through the survey and written responses about the impact of increased supermarket prices on households include:

- *We thought of ourselves as reasonably comfortable. But food inflation is digging deep. Yes, we are having to think twice about what we buy and for the first times in our lives think if things don't get better, we will end up being pensioners. Never thought this a possibility.*
- *Living in rural area the price of food items has skyrocketed, prices go up daily. We can't often afford the basics. Every fortnight there are major trade-offs. Even if we need both we must decide, is it eggs or cheese? Next decision, the quantity? No kidding it's now serious family business.*
- *The price of bread and milk are worrying. We have cut back on the meat we buy. Once we would have T bone steak or lamb chops once a week but now, we forgo those... Sad, because we are 80*
- *It's possibly not to everyone's liking – but we're pretty desperate – we buy like meat, juice and long-life milk - in bulk via buy now, pay later schemes.*
- *It's not like it's new. As aged pensioners we're well and truly experienced in cutting our coat according to the cloth. There's never anything left over. The only difference now is there is less to start with.*

Key lifestyle changes made by older Australians include:

- eating more cheaply by buying more generic branded, processed and frozen food products rather than buying more nutritious foods for example, eggs, cheese, fish and meat
- buying large quantities of nonperishable, sale products that have a long expiry date, (such as tinned foods, olive oil, household cleaning products or toilet paper)
- placing price limits on and buying smaller quantities of fresh fruits and vegies

- cutting out discretionary items such as the daily/weekly coffee at a local café and/or dining at restaurants (not even to celebrate special occasions) and entertainment if there is a cost involved - such as excursions to the beach/countryside, cinema and theatre
- limiting social activities including friends and family get-togethers especially if entrance fees or transport costs are involved
- buying cheaper and fewer gifts for friends and family members including the grandchildren
- no longer even thinking about planning to take a holiday
- carrying out fewer home maintenance jobs if they cannot be done by oneself without professional assistance and required materials are able to be secured without any additional expense

Practical ways to better manage rises in food and grocery costs are being shared

Older Australians tell us that conversations dominated about rising cost of food have surreptitiously stimulated thinking about how to creatively get the dollar to stretch further. From what has been shared with us, people, where possible, are looking seriously for alternatives to shopping at the bigger supermarket food chains. Their aim is to find ways to lower household dependence on them as the key supplier of the household's food and grocery items.

Ideas older Australians shared with us through our survey and written responses include:

- *Attending local farmers markets or going to the farm gate to purchase instead of supermarket; purchased fruit & vegetables in cartons from local farmers instead of smaller weekly amounts from supermarkets; asked local green grocers if I can buy cartons of fruits cheaper instead of going to supermarkets ...*
- *We have started doing bulk purchasing with few families together - buying bulk vegetables and fruit from the market and sharing costs - would work better if the markets were closer – pity there's now so few*
- *Trying alternative retail stores like Costco and Aldi and IGI – good specials, more than just chocolate biscuits and chips.*
- *Sharing costs via bulk buying with others at Costco. Buying the specials & freezing. Cooking bulk meals and spread for during the week. Sharing meals amongst ourselves. Sharing grocery items.*

- *We live in a village with friendly neighbours, so we have been buying bulk bags of not-quite-right fruit and veges and sharing them around. We also grow some of our own veges and herbs and swap with neighbours.*
- *Baking our own bread. Thinking more about how people got by during the depression. There are lessons to be learnt especially about eliminating waste. But also have found good, cheap recipes.*
- *Letting each other know of particular special items at various stores*

Government has a role to play

Discussions aimed at better understanding older people's view of the Australian Government's role in regulating supermarkets – especially re pricing of food and groceries – elicits a positive response. Survey respondents had a close to unanimous agreement that the Australian Government has a responsibility to intervene to:

- a) protect consumers from unfair pricing practices
- b) ensure all households can afford necessities – for example, food and hygiene products
- c) create environments that enable robust and fair competition rather than those that breed monopolistic behaviour
- d) ensure transparency re how prices are derived inclusive of costings pertinent to all major milestones in the journey

There are clear differences expressed amongst the older people we engage regarding the degree to which government should intervene to control unfair price setting practices and restrict the market power of monopolistic supermarket chains. Whilst Government intervention gets a big tick, older people ask **to what degree should free-market principles be tempered by government's responsibility to protect consumers**. Some argue for the need for tight restriction of supermarket pricing practices, others favour a lighter touch. Several claim there must be a sweet spot. But they caution if governments don't get it right, they run the risk of creating inefficiencies that could lead to shortages or shortages, as well as stifle innovation and investment.

COTA Australia welcomes the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's 25 January 2024 announcement that he will direct the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to launch an inquiry into Australia's supermarket sector including the pricing practices of supermarkets and the relationship between wholesale, including farm gate, and the prices that people are paying at the checkout. An important part of this year-long inquiry will be an examination of the competition that exists within Australia's supermarket sector to ascertain how it has changed since the ACCC's last enquiry in 2008.

Ideas for a robust and fair supermarket industry from survey respondents

Consumer related enhancements

- Ensure pensions keep up with inflation – quarterly adjustments rather than current arrangement which increases the rate twice a year
- Retain the GST exemption for fresh fruit and vegetables
- Designate supermarket shopping periods for older people and people with disabilities with special discounts throughout the week, as was done during the Pandemic
- Ensure at least 70% of supermarket discounts are for fresh, frozen foods, nuts or legumes rather than for less healthy products such as chocolates, crisps, sweet biscuits and soft drinks
- Provide food vouchers to or an automatic checkout discount to low-income households as part of their pension payment, for fresh fruit and vegetable. This would be - an actual discount, not a supermarket designed points system
- Introduce a government sponsored shopping card for people on low income and adults 55 years and older on a pension receiving 20% of their purchase of food products, toiletries, household cleaning or general use products. Supermarkets/shops acceptance of the shopping card to be voluntary. However, supermarkets/shops which honour the card receive a special annual tax exemption to cover any financial loss incurred by accepting the shopping card
- Encourage local councils to support farmers markets and community gardens. As one January survey respondent said,

Most people my age grew up in an age before supermarkets existed and are probably used to provide their own food economically(survey respondent)
- Establish suburban 'food clubs' through state/territory governments where local people could pay a fee to have evening meals at a community centre. This would be attractive to a large number of people (pensioners, working mothers, single people), and provide social interaction. Plus, it would prove environmentally sound in limiting food packaging and wastage and help to reduce power cost for individual households

Better regulation and targeted incentives

The ACCC to:

- work with the supermarket sector and the Australian Food and Grocery Council to evaluate the effectiveness of the current Food and Grocery Code of Conduct on

achieving its stated purpose *to improve standards of business behaviour in the food and grocery sector*⁶

- recommend having supermarket pricing practices more open and transparent
- develop and enforce safeguards to ensure primary producers are receiving sufficient payment for their products.
- undertake cost modelling to ensure any price changes are consistent with increased costs only.
- publish farmgate prices as calculated by peak farmer bodies such as National Farmers Federation
- introduce tighter controls over the prices supermarkets charge for essential food products for example, cheese, milk, yoghurt, eggs bread, fruit and vegetables – and substantial penalties for infringements
- calculate and publish on a regular basis the per kilogram cost supermarkets pay for fresh food (for instance, fruit, vegetables and meat) taking account of the costs associated with growing, contracting, transporting, storing and retailing these items
- create more extensive opportunities for consumer groups to have a voice in shaping and directing the future of Australia’s supermarket retail industry
- work with state and territory governments to ensure their 'consumer affairs' or 'fair trading' agencies have and promote clear pathways for consumers to raise issues experienced with supermarkets, have these investigated and, where appropriate, addressed.

Enhanced competitive marketplace

The ACCC to:

- investigate issues that hinder the establishment of new players in the Australian supermarket retail industry
- facilitate greater competition by fast tracking the licencing of more supermarkets to compete in local areas – particularly in rural areas
- incentivise small fresh, local food businesses to build sustainable business models that enable them to compete with the giant supermarket chains on a more level playing field
- closely monitor and report on price trends to minimise the prospect of price gouging practices and ensuring that significant penalties are applied when increases are

⁶ ACCC. Food and Grocery Code of Conduct. Access at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/business/industry-codes/food-and-grocery-code-of-conduct>

found to be unfair and unreasonable. This should apply to **all industries and organisations** – including, insurance (in all forms), health, education etc.

Conclusion

The increasing cost of food and grocery items at the checkout is a major concern for most older households across Australia. Despite the reported easing of inflationary pressures, ongoing food and grocery price increases are happening at a time that sees the nation's two major supermarket chains making steady profits in what is one of the most concentrated supermarket sectors in the world.⁷ In the 2022-23 financial year, Woolworths held 37% of the market, Coles 28%, and their main competitors Aldi and IGA (Metcash) 10% and 7% of the market (the remaining 18% of the market being held by small supermarket retailers).⁸ Plus, to maximise their saturation of the supermarket sector, Coles and Woolworths have been investing heavily in supply chain *optimisation* (especially through hard-bitting negotiations with farmers/growers), as well as in store systems, mobile applications and online platforms.

A key question older Australians want the Senate Select Committee to investigate and report on is in their push for supermarket dominance have these giant retailers lost sight of their vision statements:

- **Coles:** Our vision is to become the most trusted retailer in Australia and grow long-term shareholder value. Our purpose is Helping Australians eat and live better every day.⁹
- **Woolworths:** Our vision, to be one of the world's most responsible retailers, reflects our passionate commitment to doing good business, for our customers, our people and our planet. Our values – customer obsessed, inspirational, responsible, collaborative and committed to quality – inform and underpin the way we do business.¹⁰

Survey respondents talked about the importance of openness, honesty and transparency which these visions imply. Older households want the supermarkets to uphold their respective visions and, as part of their commitment to their consumers and suppliers (especially farmers/growers), provide more publicly available transparent knowledge on the cost of goods. Even though pricing and affordability are key concerns for older Australians, many also place a premium on honesty, fairness and openness.

⁷ IBIS World: August 2023. Supermarkets and Grocery Stores in Australia, Market Size, Industry Analysis, Trends and Forecasts (2024-29). Access at: <https://www.ibisworld.com/au/industry/supermarkets-grocery-stores/1834/#IndustryStatisticsAndTrends>

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/994601/grocery-retailer-market-share-australia/>

⁹ Coles Group. Our Strategy. Access at: <https://www.colesgroup.com.au/about-us/?page=our-strategy>

¹⁰ Woolworths Holding Limited. Our Purpose, Vision and Values. Accessible at: <https://www.woolworthsholdings.co.za/overview/our-purpose-vision-and-values/>

Older people are not against supermarkets – big and small – making a profit. But they want to be confident that supermarkets are responsible and honest retailers, and their businesses practices embedded in and guided by the values they espouse. They believe this is not necessarily happening at present.

Older households in Australia are clear on wanting this inquiry to result in tighter, mandated legislative practices informing and guiding the behaviour of supermarkets. They also want to see the development of a more inclusive supermarket sector across Australia. As one person said,

What are the big ones afraid of? Supermarkets are now our main source of food and grocery purchases. Whether we like it or not, we're locked in. In return we ask them to be fair and reasonable. (written submission)

Considering the challenges and struggles older Australians have shared, we believe addressing the rising supermarket prices is imperative. The Committee has the opportunity to introduce safeguards for the financial and wellbeing of Australian households and, at a minimum, facilitate them to sustainably maintain a quality of life that meets with community expectations.