



Loddon Mallee Grocery Price Comparison Study – Year One

Understanding the Findings: Key Highlights and Next Steps



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Executive Summary

The Loddon Mallee Grocery Price Comparison Study, undertaken by Sustain: The Australian Food Network in partnership with the Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit (LMPHU), found that fresh produce costs are higher across the Loddon Mallee than in other Victorian regions studied. The highest prices were recorded in independent supermarkets in rural and regional towns, where limited retailer choice may further impact affordability. These findings highlight important challenges for food security and health equity.

Understanding the Findings: Key Highlights and Next Steps summarises the key findings and outlines five priority actions to support a healthier, more equitable regional food system.

Background

Healthy eating is a priority in the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan. Having a poor diet and being overweight or obese are leading contributors to chronic disease and premature death in Victoria, accounting for 5.4 per cent and 8.4 per cent of preventable burden of disease respectively.

Through community and stakeholder engagement, the Loddon Mallee Population Health Plan 2025-2029 identified a goal to build a more resilient, equitable and healthy food system. The LMPHU aims to support and promote evidence informed initiatives that improve access to affordable healthy food, while strengthening stakeholder capability to understand system challenges and opportunities to enhance public health outcomes.

To support this goal, the LMPHU collaborated with Sustain: The Australian Food Network as part of a three-year partnership.

Loddon Mallee Grocery Price Comparison Study – Year One

The study, produced by Sustain: The Australian Food Network, highlights evidence that food affordability is worse in rural and regional communities, particularly for fresh produce. Affordable access to healthy food is a key social determinant of health. Food affordability, availability and accessibility influence dietary behaviours and contribute to health inequities experienced by rural and regional communities. The findings point to potential structural issues in food access and retail availability, suggesting a need for targeted action to improve affordability and support local food systems.

Further Reading

Readers seeking a deeper understanding of the findings are encouraged to review the following sections of the study:

- The pillars of food security (page 6)
- Six dimensions of food security (page 7)
- Data collection and processing methodology (page 14)
- Basket price variability by SEIFA decile, including Table 5 (page 21)
- LMPHU basket cost by retailer type and SEIFA decile, including Figures 5 & 6 (pages 24-25)

Key Highlights

- The LMPHU region had the highest fresh produce basket prices of the three Public Health Unit (PHU) catchments studied, which included the North Eastern Public Health Unit (NEPHU), the Western Public Health Unit (WPHU) and the Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit.

Median basket prices in:

\$66.06 LMPHU

\$55.32 NEPHU

\$54.50 WPHU

- Major supermarket prices were relatively stable and consistent across metropolitan, regional and rural locations.
- Independent supermarkets in regional and rural towns were generally more expensive and showed greater price variation than major supermarkets.

Median Basket Prices across Loddon Mallee:

Independent supermarket median basket: **\$68.36**

Major supermarket median basket: **\$56.58**

Average price difference at independents: **\$11.78** ↑

10 of the most expensive baskets across all three PHU catchments were from independent supermarkets, all located in the LMPHU region.

In the Sustain study, retailer locations were mapped across five geographical areas – rural town, regional town, outer metropolitan, middle metropolitan, and inner metropolitan. When analysed by geography, the strongest finding of the study is a clear regional affordability gap:

Rural independent supermarket baskets were around **53%** more expensive than outer metropolitan greengrocer baskets.

Regional independent supermarket baskets were around **40%** more expensive than outer metropolitan greengrocer baskets.

- No greengrocers were included in the year one data collection within Loddon Mallee.
- In many small towns, residents have limited retailer choice, constraining consumers' ability to seek lower-cost alternatives, potentially increasing barriers to accessing affordable fresh produce.

How can the Sustain study be used?

The study is intended to help stakeholders understand the implications of food affordability in the Loddon Mallee region and identify opportunities for action within their own organisations, partnerships and communities. While the findings highlight regional challenges, they also provide a foundation for collaboration and evidence informed decision making. Community health services, local governments, food relief and community organisations and food coalitions across our region are encouraged to utilise the data and analytics from the study through the following mechanisms:

- Inform health promotion planning and advocacy activities.
- Support funding applications and partnership development.
- Inform municipal public health and wellbeing planning.
- Use findings alongside local food environment data to identify community needs and priorities.
- Identify opportunities for collaboration, innovation and knowledge sharing.
- Align local activities with broader healthy food system priorities.

Next steps - Connecting study findings

This study provides an opportunity to bring our partners and networks together to explore what the findings mean locally. This allows us to identify practical actions that align with the [LMPHU Population Health Plan 025-2029](#) and existing local food systems frameworks and projects.

The Sustain study outlined ten recommendations for the LMPHU to consider in addressing and utilising the findings of the Year One study. We recognise the interconnected and multi-level nature of the work in healthy food systems and have developed a set of five actions that most directly align and respond to the LMPHU key strategic role and existing priority activities. The LMPHU's response is outlined in the following practical next steps:

1 **Continue and expand price monitoring, including greengrocers where available**

[Recommendation ten of the Sustain Study, page 34](#)

The LMPHU is committed to repeating the audit in 2026 and 2027, to track changes over time, and identify emerging affordability hotspots. In year two, expansion will include sampling greengrocers in regional centres where they exist. This will help determine whether lower-cost alternatives exist locally similar to metropolitan greengrocers.

2 **Develop a regional food environment profile**

[Recommendation four of the Sustain study, page 33](#)

The LMPHU has been partnering with Local Governments across the catchment and the Australian Food Atlas, supported by Edith Cowan University, to strengthen understanding of the regional food environment. Through the sharing of information on food premises and other food access points, the project is building “an interactive, web-based platform that brings together municipal council food and/or beverage business registration data to map, measure and monitor food access”. Once launched, the Atlas will support food environment profiling, enable benchmarking against similar councils across an emerging national platform and contribute to evidence supporting the availability of healthy, fresh food across the region. Future work will explore opportunities to enhance understanding of access and availability to culturally appropriate foods across diverse communities.

3 **Work in partnership with existing food networks and partners to identify practical food access solutions with a focus on rural and regional towns that had higher fresh produce basket prices and limited retailer choice**

[Recommendation ten of the Sustain Study, page 34](#)

The LMPHU will continue to support existing and emerging food systems related networks, linking partners, showcasing successful initiatives, and exploring new opportunities.

Through our Food EPI work, partnerships with Sustain: The Australian Food Network and the Australian Food Atlas, and participation in the Local Public Health Unit Healthy Food Systems Community of Practice, we have built strong connections at multiple levels. By continuing to share knowledge and expertise, we can strengthen communication, collaboration, and capacity building across the state.

4

Explore and showcase regional food infrastructure solutions

[Recommendation seven of the Sustain study, page 34](#)

Across the region, there are several existing networks that are addressing the food system. Healthy Loddon Campaspe are improving health outcomes through enabling opportunities to engage with healthy, local food and active lifestyles across the Loddon Campaspe region. Significant regional food hubs across the Loddon Mallee are working towards addressing connections to accessible, fresh healthy food. Local examples include Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council's Nourish Supermarket, Swan Hill Food For All and Bendigo Foodshare's Grow Cook Share Food Hub.

The LMPHU will explore hosting a forum to highlight initiatives and opportunities to strengthen local food systems such as:

- Cooperative purchasing
- Shared warehousing
- Mobile markets
- Produce box schemes
- Partnerships with local growers and retailers

5

Establish a regional food systems working group

[Recommendation two of the Sustain study, page 33](#)

Through our partnerships with Sustain, local government, community health services, and food system partners we have the opportunity to join the Australian Food Network (AFN). The AFN is an online hub where those working within the food system can come together, share resources, learn from each other and find a collaborative approach to changes at a systems level. Through the AFN we are exploring options to create a region-wide working group or community of practice.

Conclusion

The Sustain study provides important evidence that the cost of healthy food, particularly fresh produce, is a significant challenge for many communities across the Loddon Mallee region. The findings highlight a clear affordability gap between rural and metropolitan areas, with limited retailer choice in some towns further restricting access to affordable, healthy food.

Addressing these challenges will require a coordinated, systems based approach that builds on existing local strengths, partnerships and initiatives. Through ongoing monitoring, improved understanding of the regional food environment, collaboration with food system partners and exploration of practical solutions, the LMPHU is committed to supporting a more resilient, equitable and healthy food system.

By working together across sectors and communities, we can strengthen access to affordable, nutritious food and contribute to better health and wellbeing outcomes for all people living in the Loddon Mallee region.

¹ [Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing plan 2023-2027] reference source 'Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021, Australian Burden of Disease Study 2018. Canberra: AIHW'



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