Indian Ocean Territories

Community Insights Report

2026

.id informed decisions

Disclaimer

This Report is prepared only for use by the person/entity who commissioned the Report and may only be used for the purpose for which it was commissioned. .id accepts no liability in connection with the recipients use or reliance on the Report.

The content of much of this Report is based on ABS Data. ABS Data and the copyright in the ABS Data remains the property of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The source ABS Data may be accessed from www.abs.gov.au, and may be used under license on terms published on the ABS website. In relation to ABS Data .id accepts no liability with respect to the correctness, accuracy, currency, completeness, relevance or otherwise of the ABS Data.

National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) Data remains the sole and complete property of NIEIR. .id accepts no liability with respect to the correctness, accuracy, currency, completeness, relevance or otherwise of the NIEIR Data.

Some content in this Report is based on Third Party Content, which .id interprets, transforms and/or reconfigures for the Report. In relation to the Third-Party Content, .id gives no warranty nor bears any liability whatsoever with respect to the correctness, accuracy, currency, completeness, relevancy or otherwise of the Third-Party Content.

Copyright Notice

This Report and all material contained within it is subject to Australian copyright law. Copyright in all such material [excluding ABS Data & other data or information where ownership by a third party is evident] is owned by .id Consulting Pty Ltd ACN 084 054 473. Other than in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968 or as specifically agreed between .id and the Client, no material from this Report may, in any form or by any means, be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, without prior written permission from .id. Any enquiries regarding the use of this Report should be directed to info@id.com.au or 03 9417 2205.

copyright © 2026 .id Consulting Pty Ltd ACN 084 054 473 All rights reserved.

.id informed decisions

About .id (informed decisions)

For almost 30 years we have been taking a 360° view of place, integrating diverse data sources at the hyperlocal level to see the full picture.

Our expert-led services support clients to develop internal expertise, co-design solutions, and innovate with confidence. Trusted by over 300 local governments, we bring strategic insight and clarity to your most important decisions.

- Plan for strategic growth
- Inform housing decisions
- Build the case for investment
- Represent your community's views

CONTENTS

01 INTRODUCTION

02 CHRISTMAS ISLAND

03 COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS

Introduction

INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORIES

TWO UNIQUE ISLAND COMMUNITIES

The Indian Ocean Territories, **Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands**, are small, remote communities with distinctive populations and highly specialised economies.

Government services, tourism and essential infrastructure play a central role in supporting employment and local businesses across both islands. While the islands share many structural characteristics, their population profiles, economic drivers and community structures differ, shaping local development opportunities and challenges.

AT A GLANCE

	CHRISTMAS ISLAND	COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS	REGIONAL WA
POPULATION	1,865	625	580,700
GROWTH (5 YRS)	0.7% p.a.	1.1% p.a.	1.3% p.a.
MEDIAN AGE	38 yrs	40 yrs	40 yrs
POP AGED 60+ YRS	20.0%	30.4%	24.9%
MEDIAN WEEKLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME	$2,190	$2,414	$1,368
ECONOMY (GRP, 2021)	$409M	$29M	$214B
JOBS (2021)	854	230	298,000
LARGEST EMPLOYER	Public Admin	Public Admin	Mining

All figures presented relate to 2024 unless otherwise specified
Data sourced from ABS, BITRE, NIEIR

HOW DOES OUR COMMUNITY COMPARE?

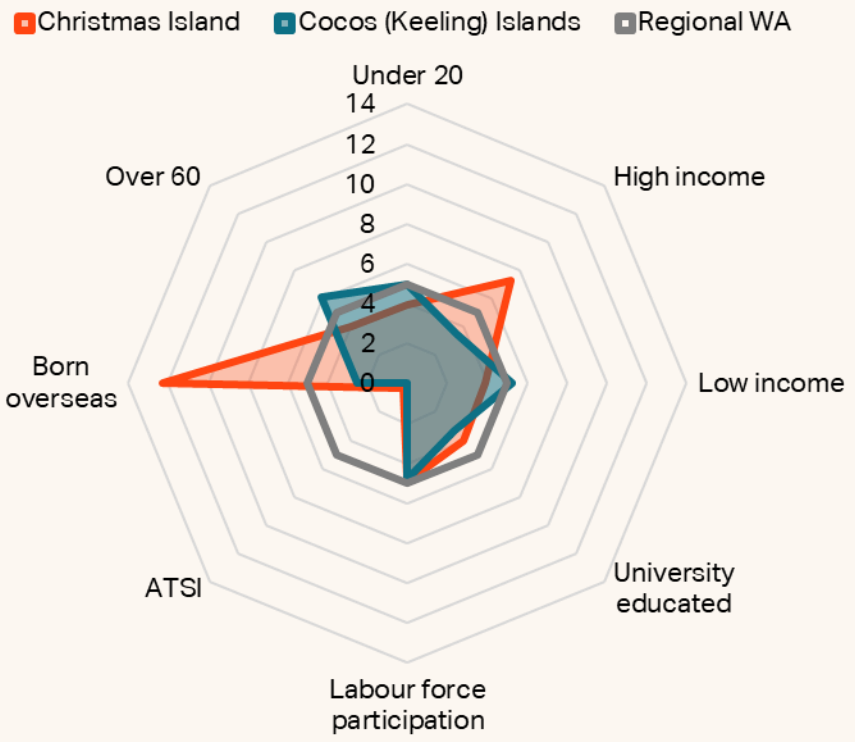
The island communities have distinct demographic profiles when compared with regional Western Australia. Christmas Island has a more diverse population, while the Cocos (Keeling) Islands has an older age profile. Despite these differences, both islands share similar levels of labour force participation and generally lower levels of university education.

Key differences include:

- Christmas Island has a significantly higher share of overseas-born residents.
- Cocos (Keeling) Islands has a higher share of residents aged 60 and over.
- Labour force participation rates are similar to regional WA across both islands.
- University education levels are lower than the regional WA average.
- Christmas Island has a larger share of high-income earners.

These patterns reflect the small, remote nature of the island communities, where migration, employment opportunities and family ties strongly influence who lives on the islands.

How do communities compare?



Source: ABS; NIEIR; .id

HOW DOES OUR ECONOMY COMPARE?

The island economies differ in scale and structure when compared with regional Western Australia. Both Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands have smaller and more specialised economies, reflecting their remote location, limited market size and strong reliance on government services and essential industries.

Key differences include:

- Lower GRP per capita across both islands compared with regional WA.
- Lower value added per worker, reflecting smaller and less diversified local economies.
- Similar levels of employed residents per capita, indicating comparable labour force participation.
- Fewer local jobs per employed resident on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Significantly fewer businesses per employed resident, highlighting the small private sector base.

These patterns reflect the small, remote and specialised nature of the island economies, where economic activity is concentrated in government services, logistics, tourism and other essential local services.

How do economies compare?

Source: ABS; NIEIR; .id

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Small but resilient communities

The Indian Ocean Territories have small populations and economies, meaning even modest demographic or economic changes can have significant impacts on local communities.

Ageing populations

Both islands are experiencing growth in residents aged 60 and over, creating new challenges for health services, housing and workforce participation.

Government services dominate employment

Public administration plays a central role in the economy and is the largest employer on both islands, reflecting the importance of government services in remote communities.

Tourism and connectivity matter

Tourism and visitor travel support local businesses, particularly in accommodation, hospitality and transport services.

Limited private sector activity

The business base across the territories is very small, with most enterprises operating in construction, retail, hospitality and local service industries.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the people, workforce and economic structure of the Indian Ocean Territories.

Indian Ocean Territories Community Insights report explores social and economic data to tell us about who lives and works in the region and what they do here.

It explores questions such as:

- Who lives on the islands and how are communities changing?
- What industries drive local economic activity?
- How do labour markets and skills compare with regional Western Australia?
- What are barriers to growth and become more resilient?

Christmas Island

OUR RESIDENTS

Christmas Island has a diverse population, driven by familial, cultural and employment ties to the Island. Residents are ageing, introducing new challenges for support and service delivery.

OUR RESIDENTS – WHO LIVES HERE AND HOW DO THEY LIVE

This chapter explores who lives on Christmas Island.

It seeks to answer questions such as

- How is the population growing?
- What is the demographic profile?
- How do our residents live?

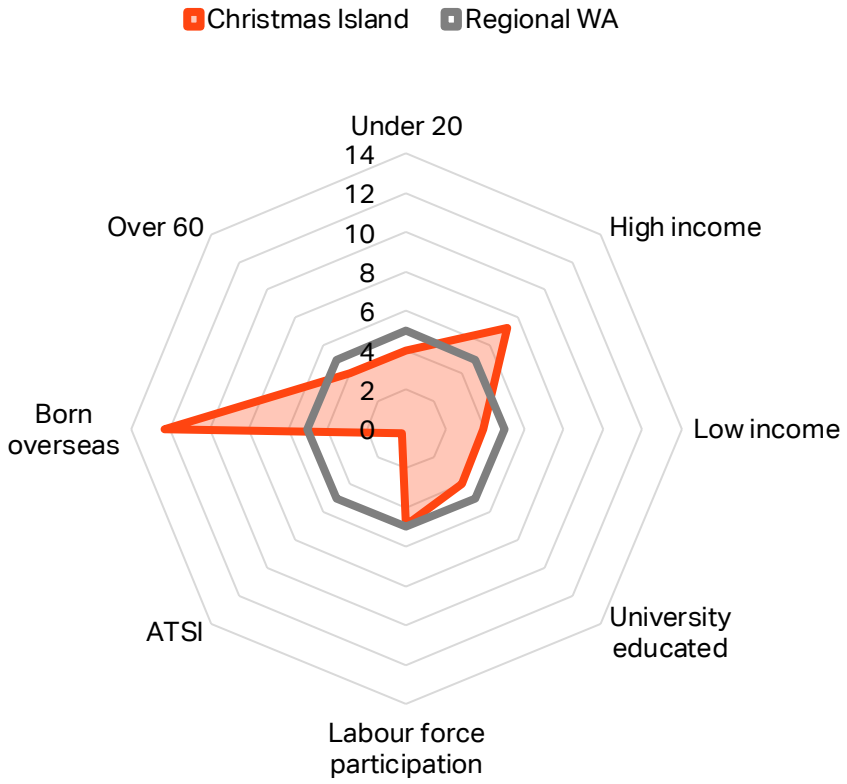
When compared to the regional WA average, Christmas Island's resident base is generally characterised as having:

- Lower share of under 20 year olds;
- Lower share of over 60 year olds;
- Significantly more overseas born;
- Significantly lower share of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;
- Similar rates of participation in the labour force;
- Lower share of university educated;
- Lower share of low income earners; and
- Considerably higher share of high income earners.

Christmas Island tends to attract those who can obtain employment on the Island which contributes the lower share of those in 'dependent' age groups (children and elderly) and higher income residents.

How do we compare?

Resident indicators to regional benchmark



Source: ABS Census, 2021; ABS Regional Population Growth, 2025

Population Growth

Population growth turns positive after several years of decline

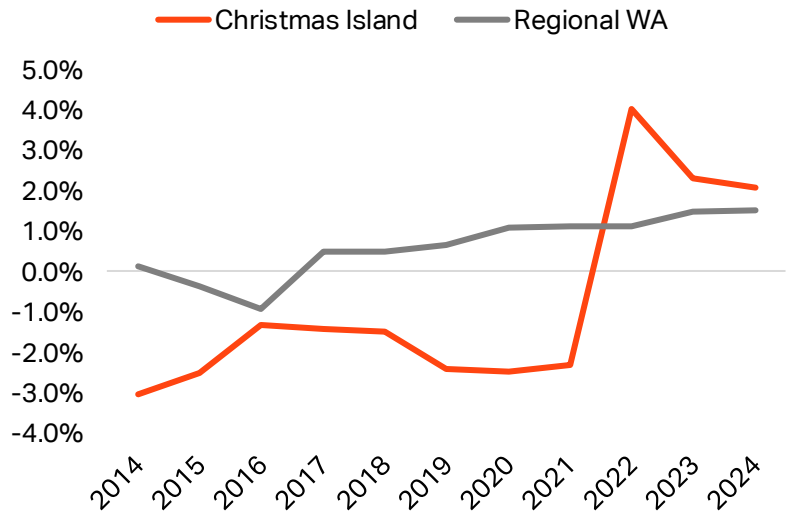
Christmas Island was home to an estimated 1,865 people in 2024. The resident population has grown by 62 in the last five years, a growth rate of 0.7% p.a. This was lower than the regional WA average of 1.3% p.a. but higher than the preceding five years (-1.8%).

0.7%

Average annual growth last five years

Population growth

Average annual change %



Source: ABS Regional Population Growth

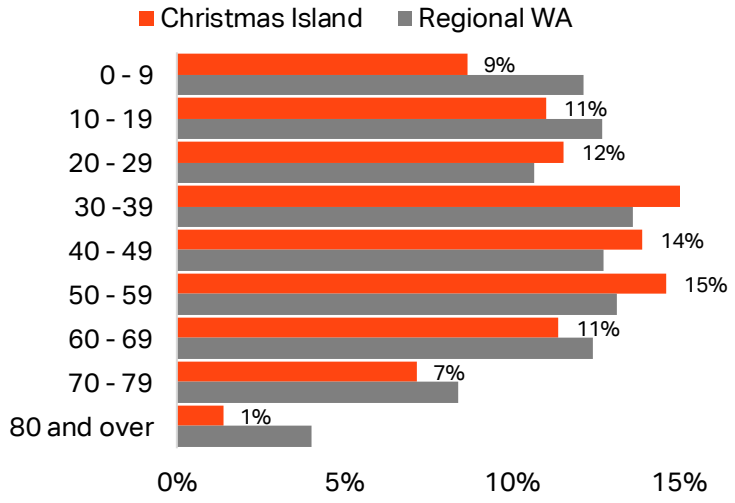
Age Profile

Relatively younger age profile than regional WA

The median age of Christmas Island residents was 38 in 2024, compared to 40 years for regional WA. The largest cohort was people aged 30 – 39, representing 20% of all residents. This was a clear divergence from regional WA (13.6%). The other main difference was a lower proportion of older adults (60-79 years) representing only 18.6% in 2024 compared to 20.9% for regional WA, and a lower proportion of elderly aged over 80 years (1.4% compared to 4%).

How do we compare?

% Share of population, 2024



Source: ABS Regional Population Growth

38

Median Age

+20

Growth in 80+ last decade

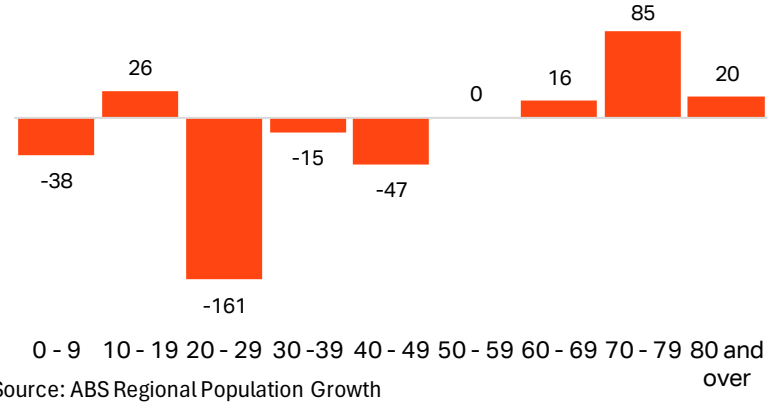
Population ageing as older cohorts grow

Christmas Island is being shaped by the ageing of the baby boomer population. The number of residents aged 60+ grew by an estimated 121 in the decade to 2024. Their share of the population grew from 12.7% to 20% in this period.

However, as Christmas Island experienced a population decline between 2014 and 2024, the majority of age groups saw a decrease in residents. The most significant decline was in those aged 20-29 years, a peak migration age with many of this cohort mobile for further education and employment opportunities.

How are we changing?

Change in numbers, 2014 to 2024



Source: ABS Regional Population Growth

Age and Sex Profile

Male population concentrated in prime working-age groups while female population is more evenly distributed

Christmas Island's population is strongly concentrated in the working-age groups, particularly those aged 30–39 years. In 2024, males aged 30–34 years represented the largest cohort (12%), followed by males aged 35–39 (11%) and females aged 30–39 (8%). This reflects the island's role as an employment-based community, with many residents relocating for work opportunities.

The most notable decline since 2014 occurred among males aged 25–29, whose share of the population fell significantly from 15% to 7%. Smaller declines were also seen among residents aged 20–24, suggesting that many younger adults leave the island for education or employment opportunities elsewhere.

While the population remains relatively young overall, there has been growth in several older age groups. In particular, the share of males aged 70–74 increased from 2% in 2014 to 7% in 2024, and females aged 65–69 increased from 2% to 6%. These changes indicate a gradual ageing of the resident population as long-term residents remain on the island.

Male 75-79 year olds

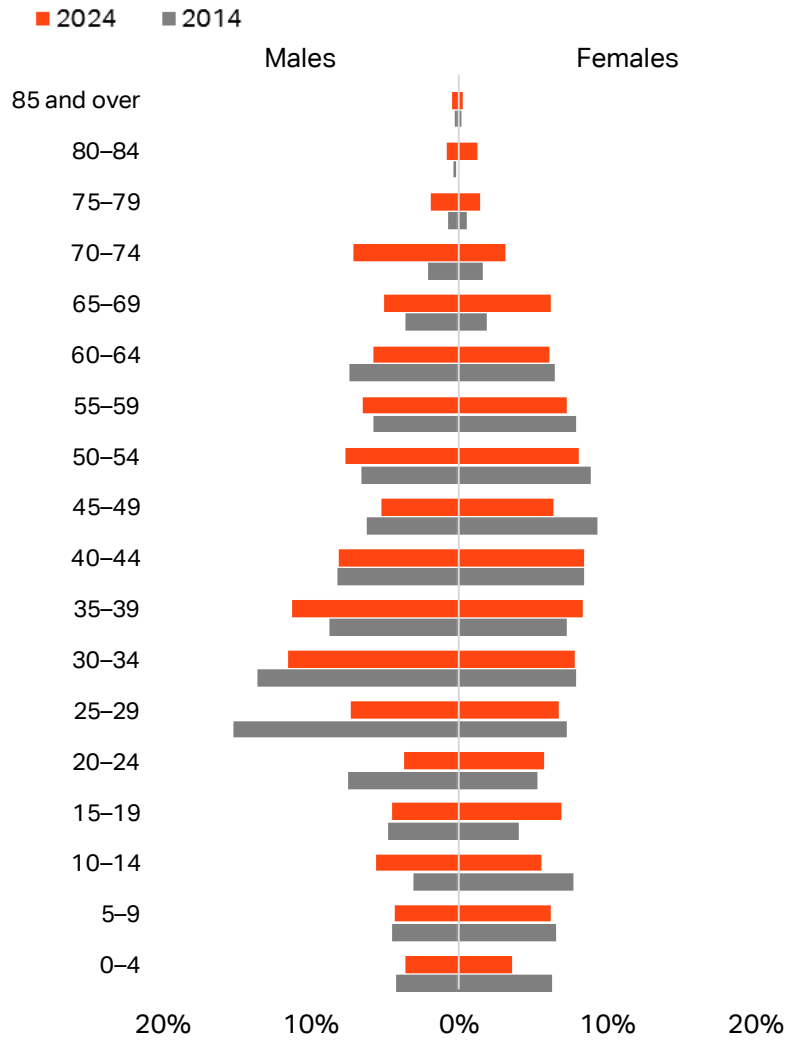
Top growth in the share of total population

Male 25-29 year olds

Top decrease in the share of total population

Age-Sex Pyramid

% of total population



Source: ABS Estimated Resident Population, 2025

Household types

Community with a high share of families with children

In 2021, the most common type of household was couples with children, representing 29% of all households. This was above the regional WA average (24%).

Looking at sub-categories, couples with young children were the most common, followed by middle aged couples and other households (eg sibling households).

The greatest divergence from the regional WA average was a:

- higher share of couples with young children
- higher share of young lone persons
- lower share of older couples without children
- lower share of single parents with young children.

Overall, the household structure reflects a community dominated by working-age residents and families, consistent with Christmas Island's role as an employment-based place of residence.

23%

Couples without children

Regional WA (26%)

29%

Couples with children

Regional WA (24%)

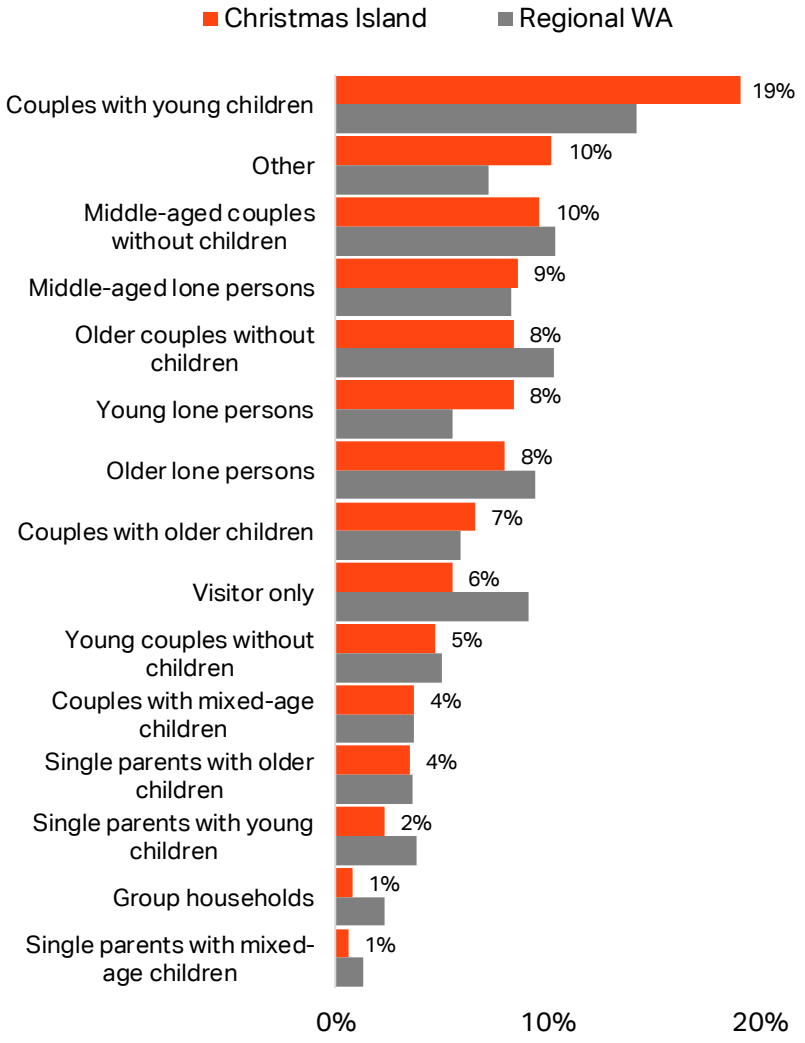
25%

Lone person households

Regional WA (23%)

How do we compare?

% Share of households, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

* Number also influenced by COVID impacts at the time

Household types contd.

Large increase in older lone persons driven by ageing population

The greatest change in household types between 2016 and 2021 was a large increase in older lone persons (+20, or +3.7% in share of households). This is due to ageing in place of baby boomers.

Other growth areas were other household types which can include family relationships such as siblings, aunt/uncle and cousins.

The largest fall was in group households (-6; -1.2%) and couples with young children (-5; -1.8%) . These declines were larger than the regional WA average (-0.2% and -1.6% respectively).

+3.7%

Growth in share of households that are older lone persons

Regional WA (+1.2%)

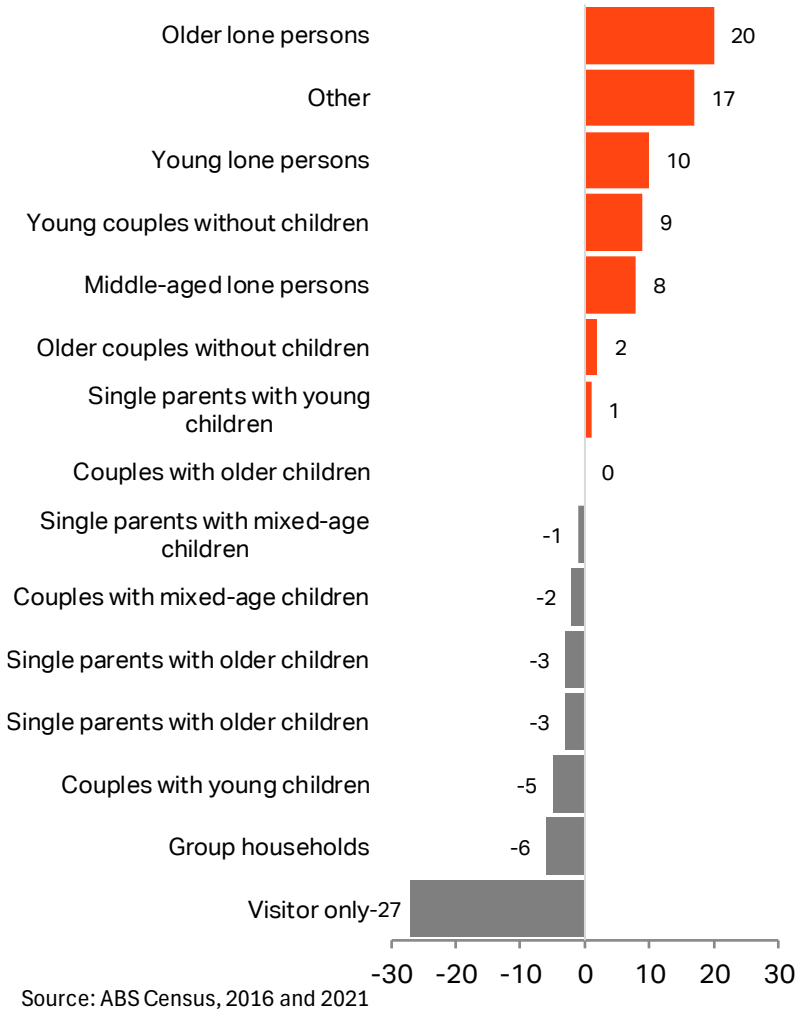
-1.8%

Growth in share of households that are couples with young children

Regional WA (-1.6%)

How are we changing?

Change in households, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

Diversity

Highly diverse, with more than 2 in 5 residents born overseas

For a location like Christmas Island, quantifying cultural diversity can be challenging. The best indicator from Census is birthplace and language spoken at home. In 2021, 43.7% of residents stated they were born overseas compared to 17.8% for regional WA and 27.7% for Australia overall. Almost 1 in 5 residents were born in Malaysia, a reflection of the geographic location of Christmas Island and its settlement history. The majority (56%) arrived in Australia prior to 1991*.

The Island has a very small Indigenous population with just 0.5% of residents identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) in 2021 compared to 8.4% for regional WA.

43.7%

Born Overseas

Regional WA (17.8%)

18%

Arrived decade prior to 2021

Regional Aus (27.9%)

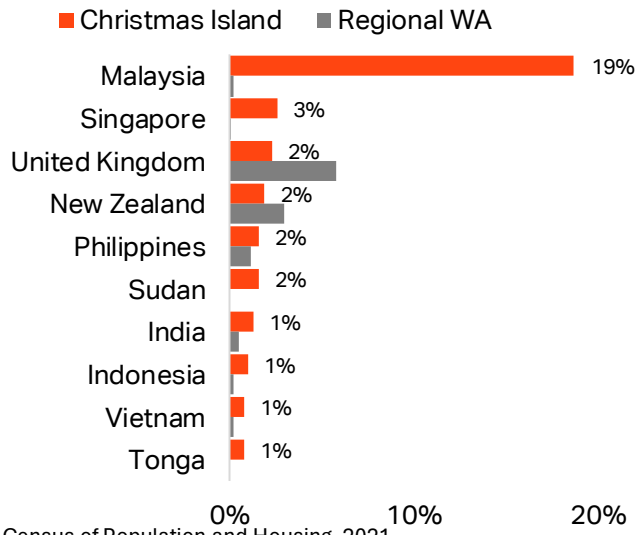
0.5%

ATSI

Regional WA (8.4%)

How do we compare?

% Share of overseas born, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

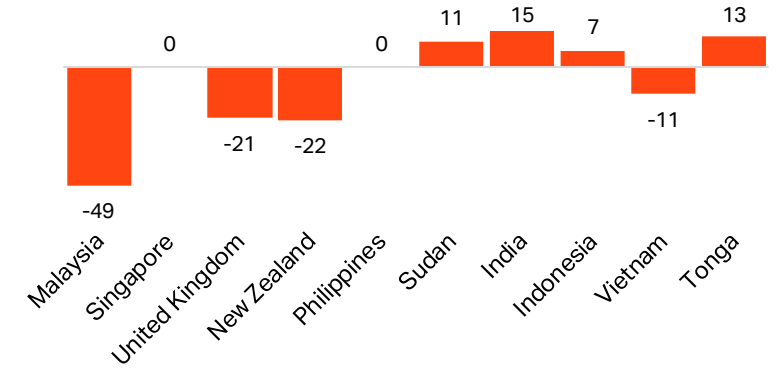
*Please note, 30% of residents born overseas did not state their year of arrival

However, overseas born population has declined over the last inter-censal period

This share of overseas born declined slightly between 2016 and 2021, significant given the large international migration rate in Australia in that period. There has also been a shift in the birthplaces represented on Christmas Island, in line with broader trends across Australia, with increases in residents form India and Sudan.

How are we changing?

Change in stated numbers, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

Diversity

Many residents speak a language other than English at home

In 2021, approximately 60% of Christmas Island residents spoke a language other than English at home*. Malay and Mandarin were the most commonly spoken languages.

There were considerable demographic differences between language groups, with Malay speakers younger overall, with a median age of 32 years. Those who spoke Mandarin at home were older, with a median age of 55 years. Those who spoke only English at home had a median age of 39.7 years.

*Of those who responded, 26% of residents did not state a language spoken at home

Engagement

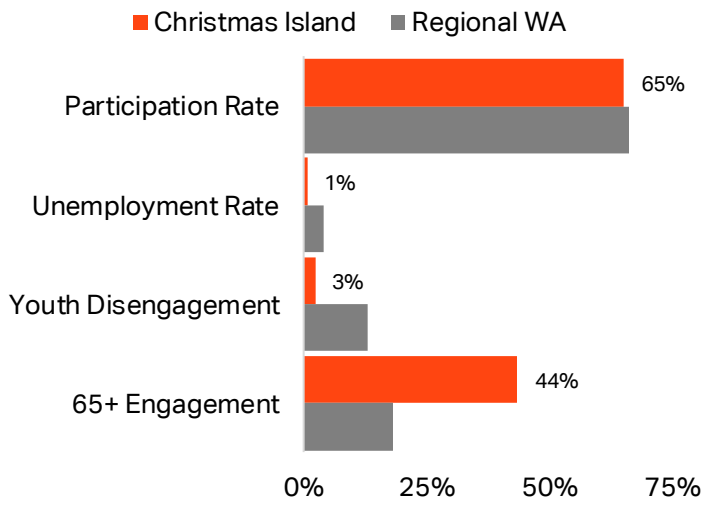
Strong labour force engagement and low unemployment

Labour force participation in Christmas Island (65.3% of residents aged 15 or over) was marginally lower than the regional WA average in 2021 (66.3%).

However, within the labour force there were significant difference between Christmas Island and the regional WA average. Youth disengagement rates were lower with 2.5% of 15-24 year olds stating they were not engaged in either work or study in 2021, compared to 13%. This is likely related to the number of young people who leave the Island, with those remaining having a reason to do so. Engagement amongst older residents is significantly higher than the regional WA average,

How do we compare?

% Share



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

65%

Participation Rate

Regional WA (66%)

2.5%

Youth Disengagement

Regional WA (13%)

+0.9%

Change in Participation

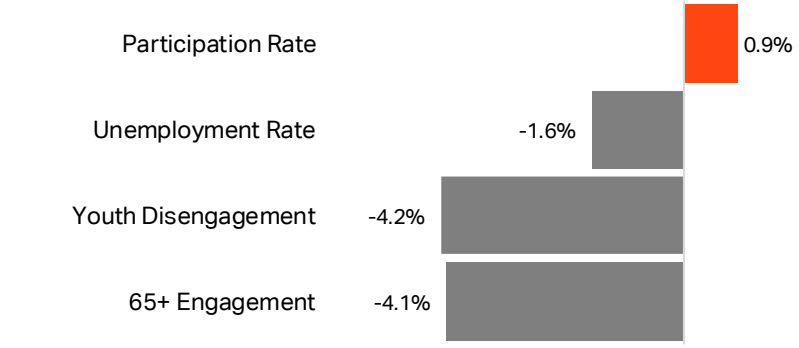
Regional WA (-0.6%)

Labour market conditions have improved since 2016

Labour market conditions strengthened between 2016 and 2021, with participation increasing slightly and unemployment declining. The most notable change was a significant reduction in youth disengagement, alongside continued strong workforce engagement among older residents. These trends suggest a labour market with high levels of participation and strong employment outcomes, despite the small size of the local economy.

How are we changing?

Change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

Education

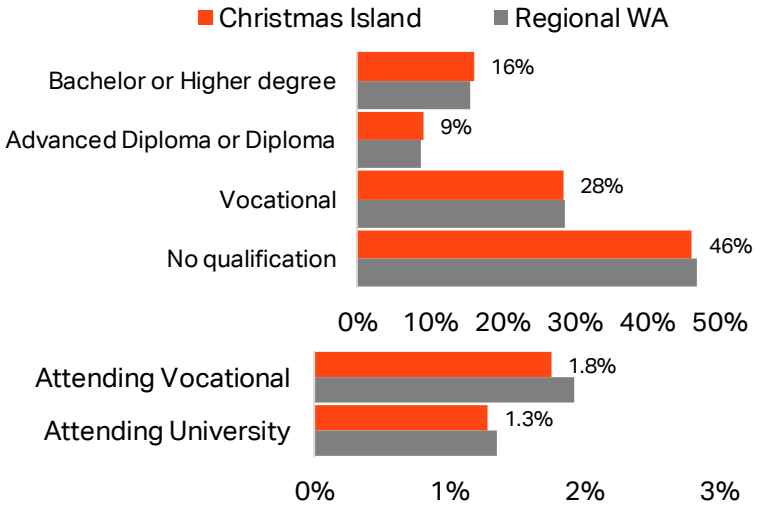
Qualification profile inline with the regional WA average

Of those Christmas Island residents who stated their education level*, 54% had a formal post-school qualifications, on par the regional WA average (53%). Within this, there were also very similar levels of Diploma or Vocational qualifications compared to the regional WA average.

Only 3.1% of the resident population were attending higher education facilities compared to 3.3% for regional WA. This may be influenced by limited higher education access on Christmas Island.

How do we compare?

% Share of 15+, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

16%

Degree Educated

Regional Aus (19%)

3.1%

Attending higher education

Regional Aus (4.7%)

+1.8%

Growth in share of residents with degrees

Regional QLD (3.2%)

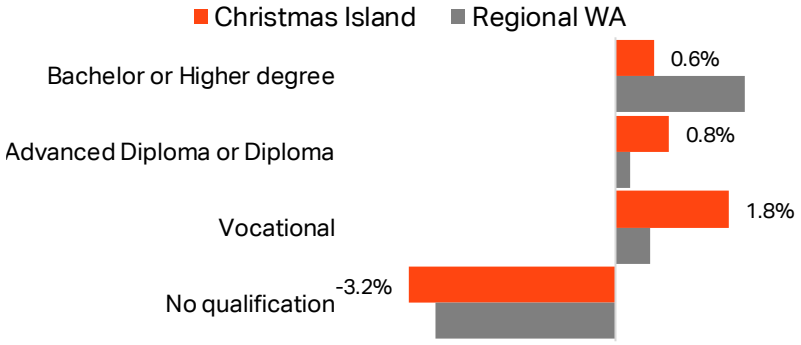
Education levels rising, but degree attainment remains lower

Like most of Australia, Christmas Island has experienced an increase in its residents who have formal qualifications. The share without fell by 3.2% between 2016 and 2021, more than the regional WA average (-2.8%).

The share of residents with vocational qualifications increased the most, rising by 1.8% in the same period (regional WA +0.5%).

How are we changing?

Change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

*Please note, 33% of residents aged 15+ years did not state their education level

Income levels

Higher individual incomes

Christmas Island residents are generally medium to high income earners, earning more than $850 per week in 2021. There are considerably fewer low income earners in comparison to the regional WA average (19% compared to 25%).

While the highest income quartile remained dominant in 2021, there had been a decline in residents in this group between 2016 and 2021 (-4.4 percentage points). There was a corresponding increase in the medium lowest quartile (+3.5 percentage points)

Unfortunately, more recent income data has been suppressed by the Australia Bureau of Statistics to protect confidentiality.

$2,190

Median weekly household income

Regional WA ($1,368)

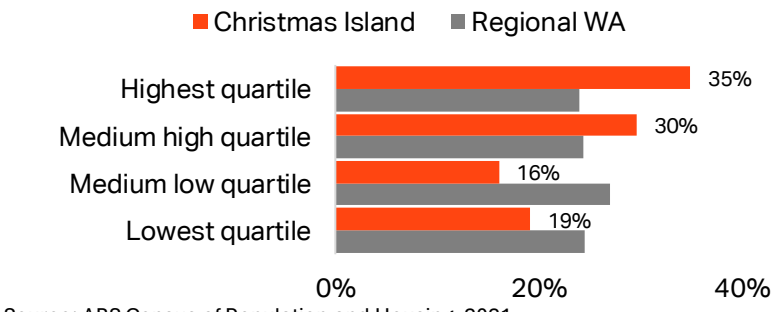
-4.4

Growth in share of individuals in highest quartile

Regional WA (-1.2%)

How do we compare?

% residents, earning within national income quartiles, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

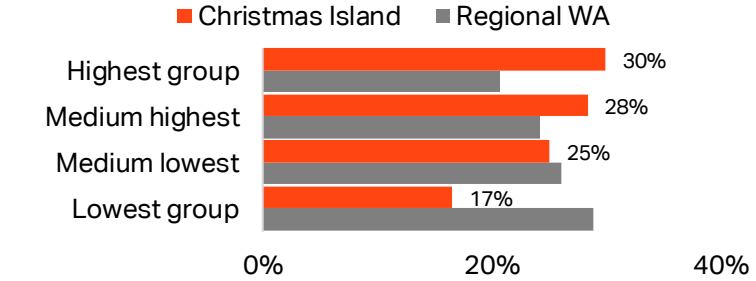
Large share of high-income households

As with individuals, there is a large share of high-income households across Christmas Island – 30% of households were earning more than $3,000 per week.

However, there was a shift in income patterns between 2016 and 2021. There was a decrease in the share of high-income households (-2 percentage points) and a significant increase in households in the lowest quartile (+8 percentage points). This change reflects the ageing of the population, with many older residents transitioning onto the Age Pension.

How do we compare?

% households, income quartiles, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Household tenure

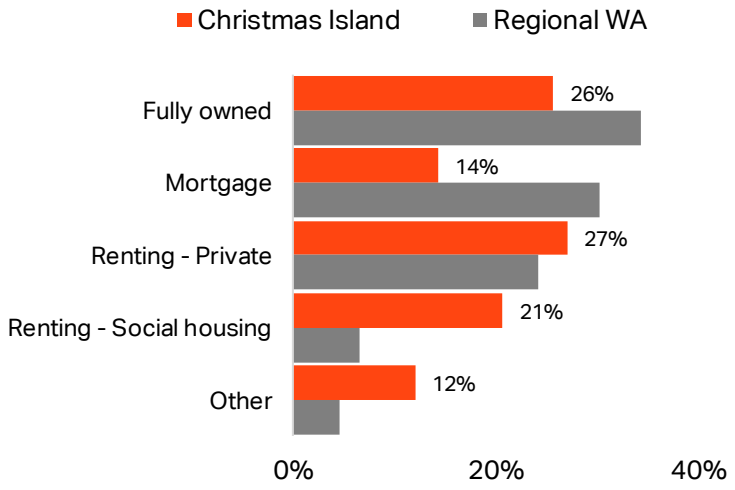
Housing tenure split between owning and renting

There were relatively equal shares of households that fully owned their homes (26%), rented privately (including from an employer, 27%) and rented social or Government or community provided housing (21%).

The 'Other' tenure type includes life tenure schemes, occupied rent free and other forms of occupancy. It's prominence in Christmas Island is not surprising given the Island's unique land ownership and governance structures.

How do we compare?

% Share of households, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

26%

Fully own their house

Regional WA (31%)

-2.3%

Change in fully owned homes

Regional WA (+1.3%)

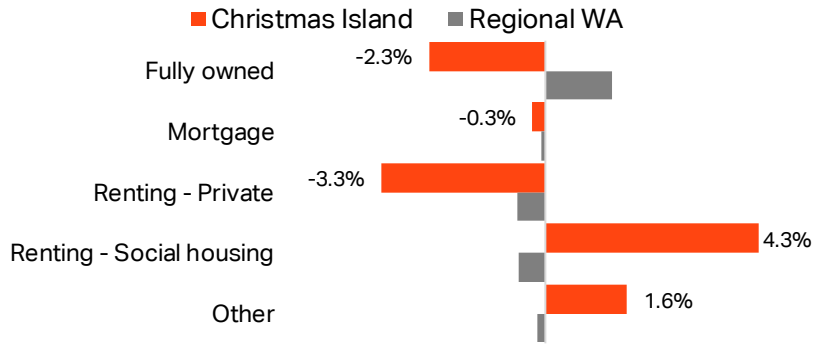
Shift toward social housing since 2016

The share of residents who fully owned their home decreased between 2016 and 2021 by 2.3%, as did other 'private' tenure types – those with a mortgage or in private rentals.

Changes in housing tenure on Christmas Island may not just be due to private market forces, but from changing provision from employers, Government and community bodies.

How are we changing?

Change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

Our Residents – Key Findings

- **Population growth has recently returned** - After several years of population decline, Christmas Island has experienced modest population growth, reaching around 1,865 residents in 2024.
- **A relatively young but ageing community** - The median age is 39.3, slightly younger than regional WA. However, the number of residents aged 60+ has increased significantly, reflecting an ageing population.
- **A family-oriented community** - Households are commonly couples with children, reflecting a population largely made up of working-age families.
- **A highly diverse population** - Around 44% of residents were born overseas, far higher than regional WA. Malay and Mandarin are widely spoken languages on the island.
- **Strong labour force engagement** - Labour force participation is similar to regional WA, with low unemployment and very low youth disengagement, indicating strong workforce engagement among residents.
- **Education levels similar to regional WA** - Around 54% of residents hold a post-school qualification, with vocational qualifications particularly common.
- **Relatively high incomes** - Household incomes are generally higher than regional WA, although there has been a recent shift toward lower income brackets as the population ages.
- **Housing tenure is mixed** - Home ownership, private rental and social housing each account for a significant share of households, reflecting the island's unique land ownership and housing arrangements.

What it means for regional development?

- **Respond to an ageing population**, including services and housing that support older residents.
- **Retain younger residents**, particularly through employment and education pathways.
- **Support a diverse community**, ensuring services are inclusive and culturally responsive.
- **Plan for housing diversity**, reflecting the island's mix of ownership and rental arrangements.

OUR ECONOMY

Christmas Island has a small and specialised economy shaped by government services, phosphate mining, tourism and local service industries. Its remote location and limited private sector create unique challenges for economic growth and employment, while mining and public administration remain key drivers of economic activity.

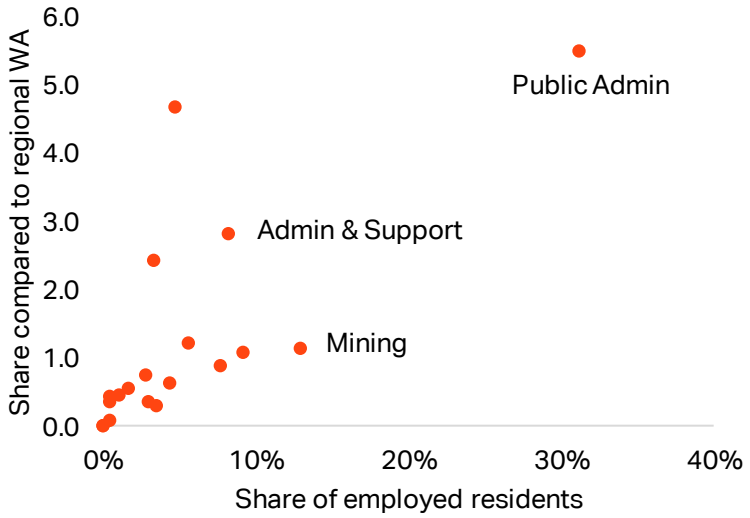
Employment profile

Public Sector employ almost 1 in 3 resident workers

Public Administration and Safety is the largest employing industry for Christmas Island residents. In 2021, over 30% of employed residents worked in this sector, around five times the share in regional Western Australia (5.7%). Mining accounted for 12% of employment, followed by Construction (9%) and Administrative and Support Services (8%). Employment shares in Mining and Construction were notably higher than in regional WA, while Administrative and Support Services employed around 2.8 times the regional share.

How do we compare?

% share of employed residents, 2021



Source: ABS Census 2021

70.3%

Full-time Employed

Regional WA (58.7%)

Top industries of employment

Public Admin & Safety

Mining

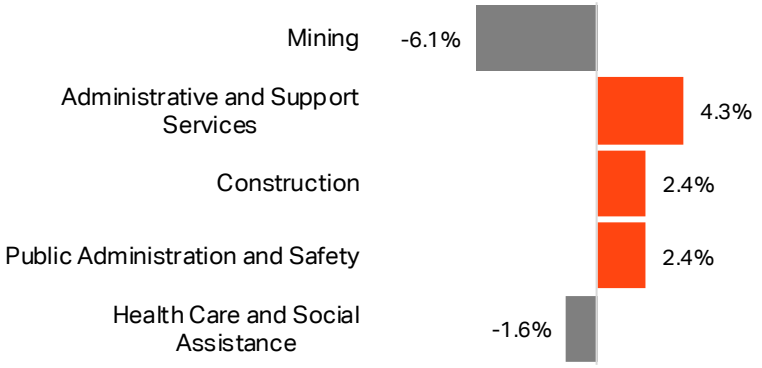
Construction

Employment growing strongly in Administrative and Support Services, while Mining jobs experienced a large fall

Employment patterns on Christmas Island have shifted between 2016 and 2021. The share of residents employed in Administrative and Support Services increased by 4.3 percentage points over this period. Construction and Public Administration and Safety also recorded modest increases. In contrast, Mining experienced the largest decline, with its employment share falling by 6.1 percentage points (a decrease of around 54 jobs).

How are we changing?

Top industries by change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census 2021

* Employment in Agriculture can fluctuate considerably depending on production conditions

OUR ECONOMY – WHAT DRIVES IT AND WHO WORKS HERE

This chapter explores the makeup of Christmas Island's local economy. It seeks to answer questions such as

- How is the economy growing?
- What is the make up of the economy?
- what are the characteristics of the workforce?

When compared to the regional WA average, Christmas Island is generally characterised as having:

- Lower GRP per capita;
- Lower value added per worker;
- Marginally higher employment of residents per capita (participation);
- Similar jobs per employed resident; and
- Significantly less businesses per employed resident.

Christmas Island's unique economic structure helps explain these results. The Island has a relatively small and specialised business base, with activity concentrated in public administration, services, and tourism-related industries. Its geographic isolation and limited local market size also constrain business diversity and scale, influencing overall productivity and the number of businesses operating locally.

How do we compare?

Economic indicators to regional benchmark, 2021

Source: NIEIR, 2025, ABS, 2025

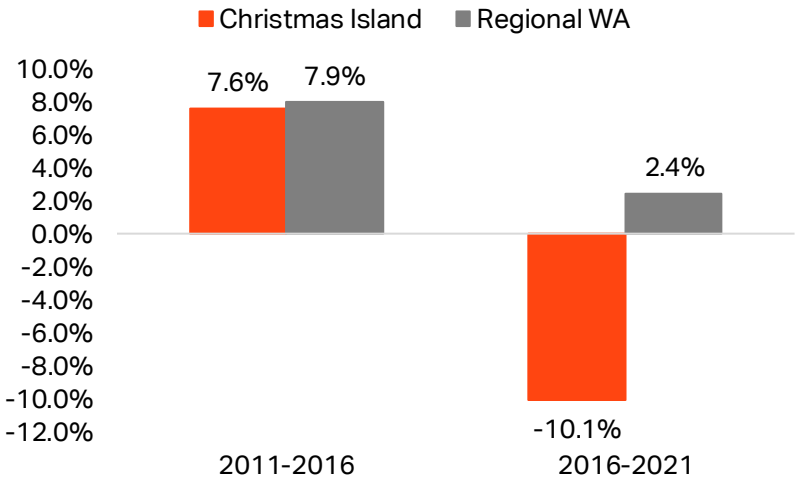
Economic Growth

Christmas Island economy contracted after 2016

Christmas Island's economy grew strongly in the early 2010s, with economic output increasing by an average of 7.6% per year between 2011 and 2016, broadly in line with regional Western Australia. However, between 2016 and 2021 the economy contracted by 10.1% per year, while regional WA continued to record modest growth. The decline coincided with a significant reduction in mining employment, reflecting the central role of the phosphate industry in the island's economy.

Sharp Economic Decline on Christmas Island 2016-21

Average annual change %



Source: ABS Census; NIEIR, 2025

$409M GRP

46rd highest in regional WA

-10.1%

Average growth last 2016-2021

4th

Lowest growth in regional WA

Productivity

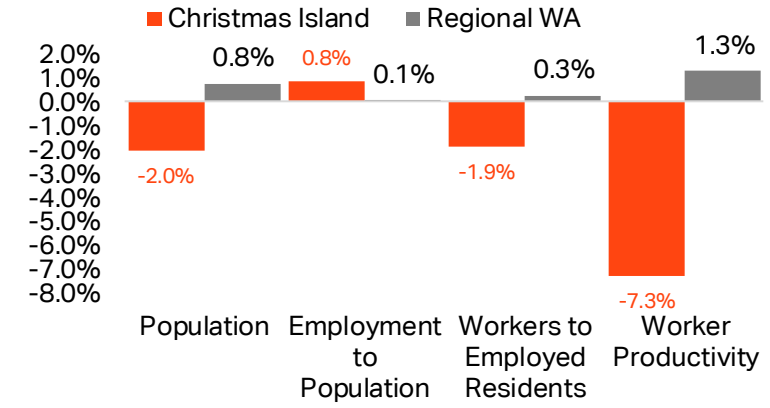
Largest economic detractor

Economic change driven by falling productivity

A component analysis highlights the factors contributing to economic change on Christmas Island between 2016 and 2021. Population growth provided a small positive contribution to economic activity, and employment growth was broadly stable. However, the number of workers relative to employed residents declined, and the largest drag on growth came from falling worker productivity. Together these factors contributed to the overall decline in economic output over the period.

Economic growth components

% Contribution to economic growth, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS & NIEIR, 2025

* The three P's (population, participation and productivity) is a common simplistic method to explore what is driving economic growth at a national level. For LGAs, it is useful to add a fourth measure of employment capacity (ratio of local jobs to employed workers) as unlike national economics there can be a big difference between employed residents and local worker numbers.

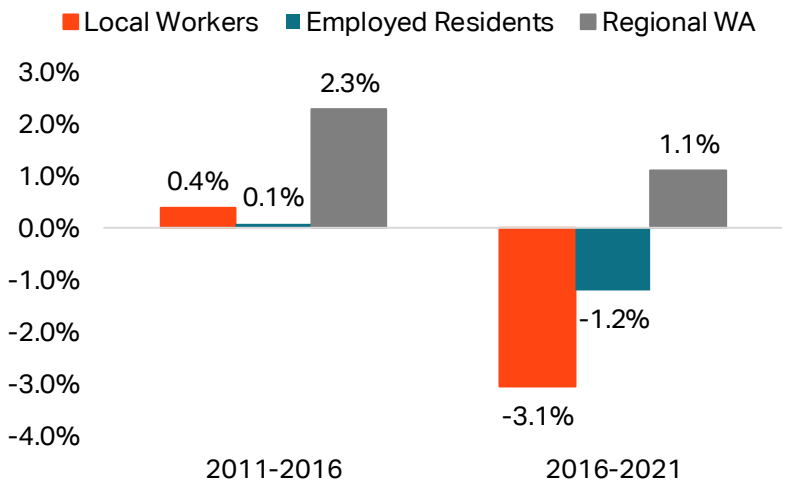
Local employment

Large jobs decreased due to Mining from 2016-2021

Christmas Island supported around 854 workers in 2021, down from approximately 998 workers in 2016. The decline was largely driven by a significant reduction in mining employment, which fell by around 80 jobs over the period. While some industries such as construction and administrative services recorded modest growth, these increases were not enough to offset losses in mining and several service sectors. As a result, the number of local workers declined noticeably between 2016 and 2021.

Below average jobs growth

Average annual change %



Source: ABS Census

854 workers

50st highest in regional WA

3.1%

Average growth 2016-2021

6th

Lowest growth in regional WA

1.5%

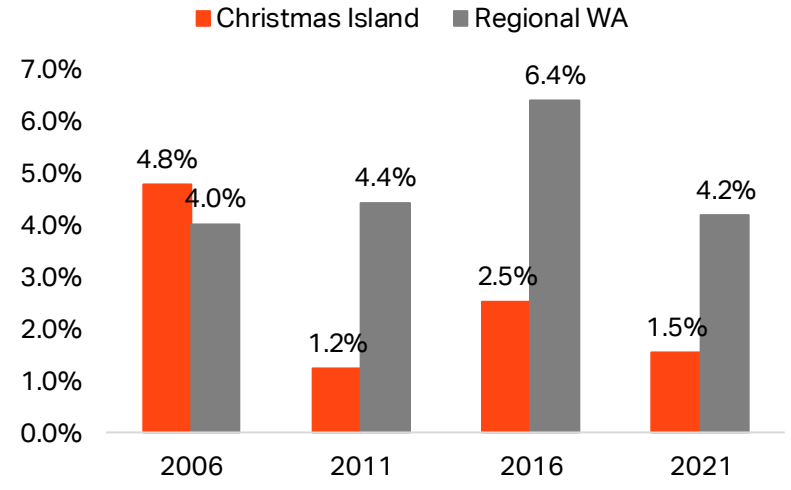
11th lowest Unemployment Rate

Unemployment remained low despite the fall in jobs

Despite changes in local employment, unemployment on Christmas Island has generally remained below the regional Western Australia average. Census data shows unemployment rates on the island have fluctuated over time but were around 1.5% in 2021, compared with 4.2% across regional WA. The relatively low unemployment rate reflects the small labour market and the strong presence of public sector employment on the island.

Generally lower unemployment

Unemployment rate as at the time of Census



Source: ABS Census

Industry Structure

Public sector dominates employment while mining drives economic value

Employment is largely concentrated in population-serving industries. Public Administration and Safety is the largest employer, reflecting the significant role of government services on the island. Other major employing industries include education and construction. In contrast, much of the island's economic value is generated by export-oriented industries, particularly phosphate mining, which remains a key driver of economic activity despite employing fewer workers than the public sector.

Top Employing Industries	Top Value Industries
Public Admin. & Safety	Mining
Mining	Public Admin. & Safety
Construction	Construction
Education & Training	Admin & Support SVC
Admin & Support SVC	Transport, Postal & Warehousing

Source: NIEIR, 2025

Public Admin & Safety
Employees the most workers

Mining
Contributes the most $$ value

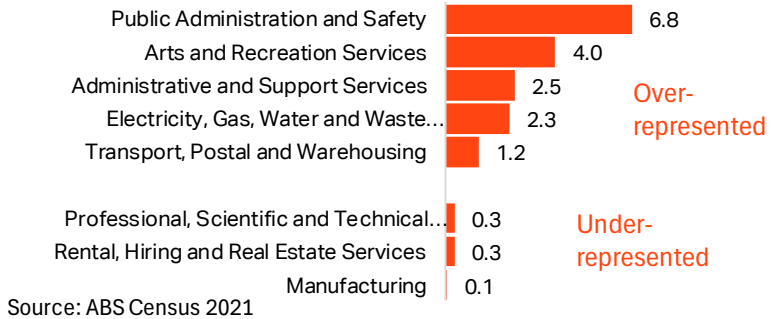
Non-Metallic Mineral Mining
Most over-represented sub-industry

Public sector and services highly represented

Compared with regional Western Australia, Christmas Island has higher employment shares in public administration and safety, arts and recreation services, and administrative and support services. These industries reflect the island's reliance on government activity and services that support the local community. At a more detailed level, specialised sub-industries include non-metallic mineral mining, public administration and regulatory services, electricity supply, and transport support services.

How do we compare?

Location Quotient*



Source: ABS Census 2021

Over-represented Sub-industries

Non-Metallic Mineral Mining and Quarrying; Public Order, Safety and Regulatory Services; Defence; Heritage Activities; Sports and Recreation Activities; Electricity Supply; Public Administration; Transport Support Services; Other Transport

Source: ABS Census 2021

*Location Quotients are a simple way of seeing which are the specialist industries in an area relative to a wider region. For example, an LQ of 1.2 means the share of industry jobs in the region is 1.2 times more than that industry job's share in the wider region

Workforce characteristics

Community and labouring roles over-represented

The occupational structure of Christmas Island's workforce differs from that of regional Western Australia. Community and personal service workers represent a relatively large share of employment, reflecting the importance of government services and local service industries. Labourers and technicians are also well represented, while professional and machinery operator occupations account for a smaller share of employment compared with the broader regional workforce.

How do we compare?

% Share of workers

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Security Officers and Guards

Most common occupation (followed by Commercial Cleaners and General Clerks)

Prison officers

Most over-represented occupation

More full-time and overseas workers

Christmas Island's workforce is relatively mature and diverse. Workers have a median age of 45, with 78% employed full-time and 46% born overseas. Around 20% hold a university degree. Median incomes on Christmas Island are higher than the regional Western Australia average ($79,665 per year compared with $72,713). As a result, while the Islands face challenges associated with remoteness and limited services, they do not necessarily exhibit disadvantage in the conventional socio-economic sense captured by indicators such as SEIFA.

Key Workforce Characteristics

45
Median Age
(42 years)

20%
Degree educated
(20%)

56% / 44%
Male / Female
(57% / 43%)

78%
Full-time
(70%)

46%
Born Overseas
(26%)

$79,665
Median Income
($72,713)

Source: ABS Census 2021

Workforce skills

Education most common among university graduates

Among degree-qualified workers on Christmas Island, education is the most common field of study. Around 23% of workers with degrees hold qualifications in education, slightly higher than the share across regional Western Australia. Other common fields include health, management and commerce, and natural and physical sciences, reflecting the importance of government services and professional roles in the local workforce.

Teacher Education

Most common degree

(followed by Nursing)

Business and Management

Most common Certificate/ Diploma

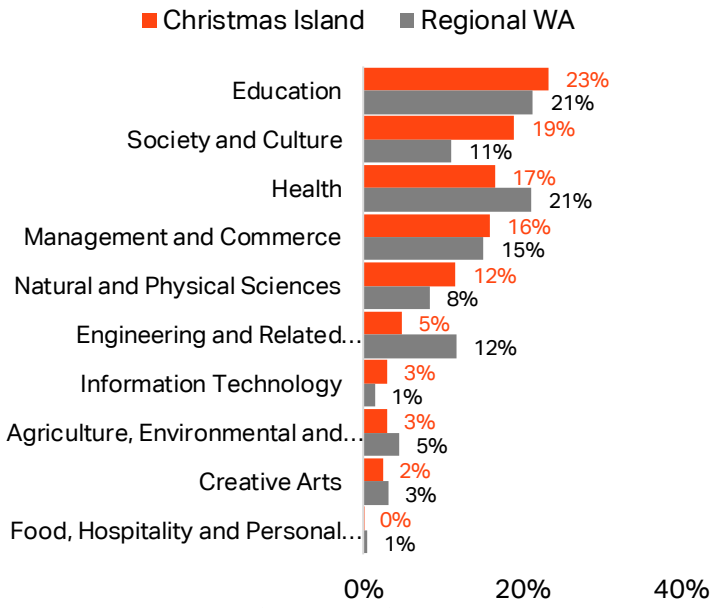
(followed by Food and Hospitality)

Technical and trade qualifications also important

Certificate and diploma qualifications are concentrated in engineering and related technologies, which account for the largest share of vocational qualifications among workers. Other common fields include management and commerce, society and culture, and architecture and building. These qualifications support a range of roles across construction, administration, and service industries on the island.

How do we compare?

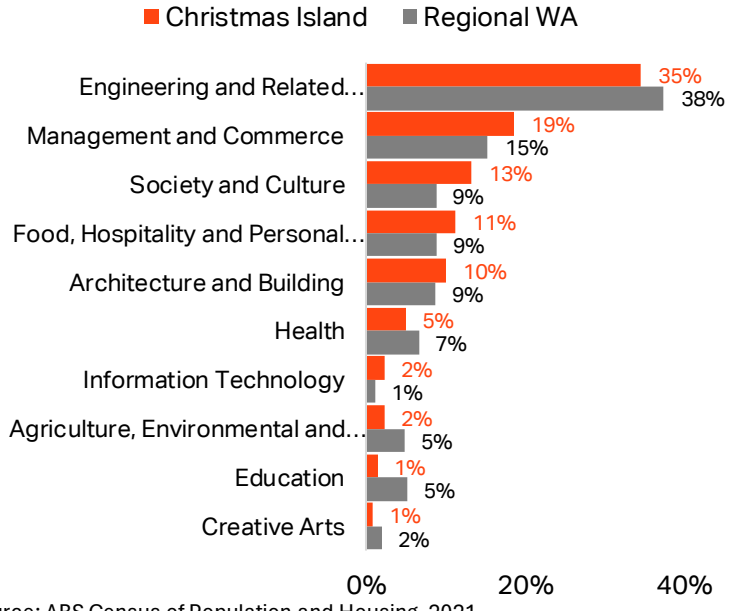
% Share of workers with degrees



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

How do we compare?

% Share of workers with certificate/diploma qualifications



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Registered businesses

Small businesses dominate the local economy

Christmas Island has a relatively small number of registered businesses, with around 51 GST-registered businesses operating in 2022/23. Many of these are small, locally owned enterprises that provide services to the resident population and visitors. Construction and trade-related businesses account for the largest share of registered businesses, followed by industries such as transport, accommodation and food services, and professional services.

Top Industries for Registered Businesses

- Construction – 13
- Transport, postal and warehousing – 7
- Accommodation and food services – 5
- Professional, Scientific & Technical – 4
- Other services* – 4

Source: ABS, Counts of Australian Businesses, 2025

51

GST Registered Businesses 2022/23

Construction

Largest industry for registered businesses

59%

Employing businesses

Regional WA (40%)

More small employing businesses than average

Compared with regional Western Australia, Christmas Island has fewer sole traders and more businesses employing 1–4 people. This points to a business base made up of small employing firms, rather than non-employing operators.

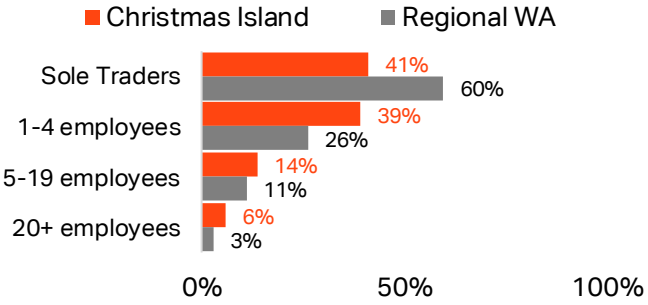
How do we compare?

Over-represented industries, LQ

Source: ABS, Counts of Australian Businesses, 2025

How do we compare?

% Share of GST registered businesses



Source: ABS, Counts of Australian Businesses, 2025

*Other services include repair and maintenance, household services (e.g. hairdressing, cleaning).

**Location Quotients are a simple way of seeing which are the specialist industries in an area relative to a wider region. For example, an LQ of 1.2 means the share of industry jobs in the region is 1.2 times more than that industry job's share in the wider region

Investment pipeline

Building approvals remain modest

The total value of building approvals on Christmas Island has been relatively modest in recent years, reflecting the island's small population and development pipeline. Around $5.2 million in building approvals were recorded across FY2024 and FY2025, with most activity occurring in non-residential projects.

$5.2M

Total value of building approvals, in FY2024 and FY2025

6%

Share of value that is residential

Other non-residential n.e.c.

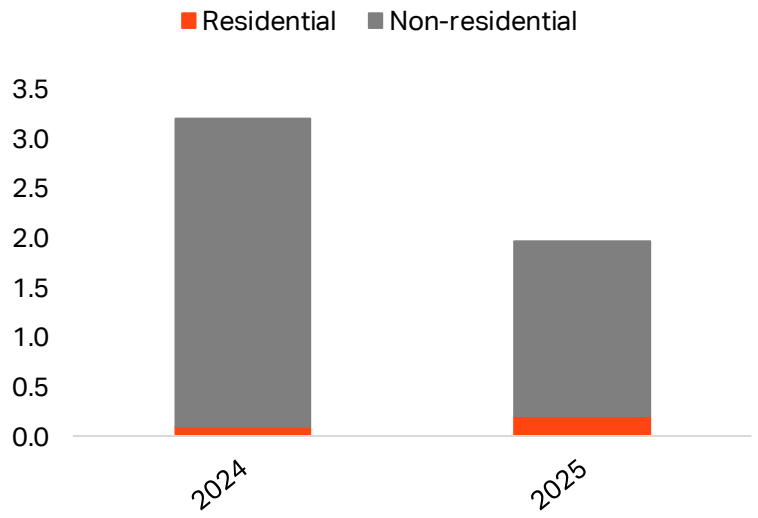
Largest value of non-residential

Investment focused on tourism and service buildings

Recent investment has been concentrated in non-residential developments, particularly in categories such as other non-residential buildings and short-term accommodation. Smaller approvals were also recorded for warehouse developments, indicating incremental investment in tourism, services, and supporting infrastructure.

Building approvals

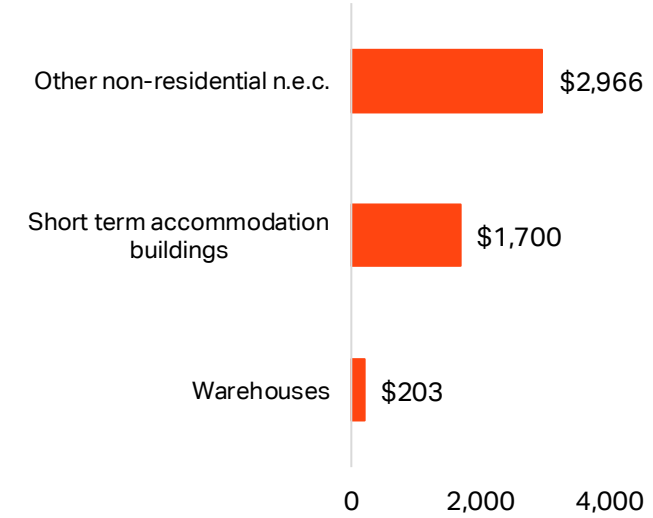
Financial year value approved $M



Source: ABS, Building Approvals, 2025

Non-residential approvals

FY2024 and FY2025 value approved $'000



Source: ABS, Building Approvals, 2025

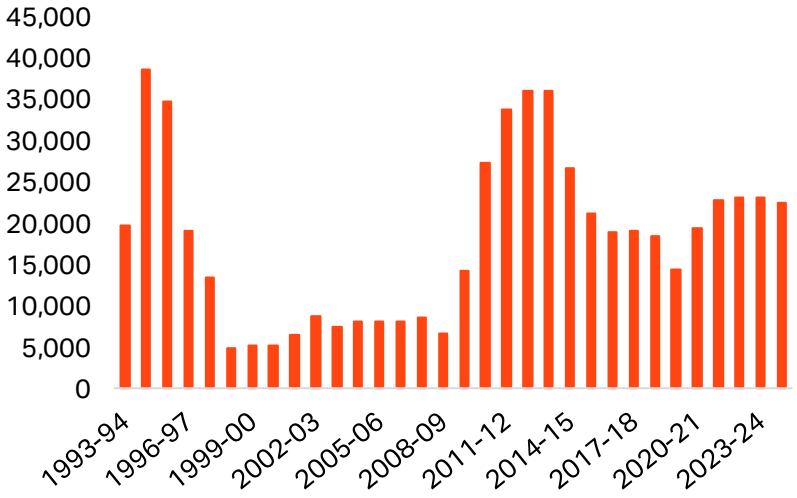
Tourism and hospitality

Tourism and hospitality supports the local economy

Tourism and hospitality* is an important contributor to the Christmas Island economy, supporting an estimated 8.4% of total employment, slightly above the regional Western Australia average. Air passenger activity is largely reflected in air passenger movements, which have fluctuated over time but have recently recovered to above pre-COVID levels, reaching around 22,400 passengers in 2024/25. This rebound highlights the role of tourism in supporting local businesses, particularly accommodation, hospitality, and visitor services.

Air Passenger above pre-COVID level, but below 2013 peak

Air Passenger Movements



Source: BITRE, 2025

8.4%

Total employment supported by tourism and hospitality sector

Regional WA (6.6%)

22.4K

Air passenger movements in 2024/25

*Tourism is not defined as a single industry within ANZSIC classifications. In this report, tourism and hospitality employment is estimated by selecting relevant tourism-related occupations from the ABS Census and aggregating them to represent jobs associated with tourism and hospitality activity across multiple industries.

Our Economy – Key Findings

- **Christmas Island's economy has faced recent contraction** — Economic output grew strongly between 2011 and 2016 but declined sharply between 2016 and 2021, largely due to a reduction in mining activity and falling productivity. Mining remains a key value-generating industry despite employing fewer workers than the public sector.
- **Government services dominate local employment** - Public Administration and Safety employs almost one in three workers, around five times the share in regional Western Australia. Other major employing industries include education, construction, and administrative services.
- **The labour market is small but relatively stable** - Local employment declined from around 998 workers in 2016 to 854 in 2021, largely driven by the fall in mining jobs. Despite this, unemployment remains low (around 1.5%), supported by strong public sector employment and steady labour force participation.
- **The workforce is mature, diverse and largely full-time** - Workers have a median age of 45, with 78% employed full-time and 46% born overseas. Service occupations and labouring roles are more common than in regional Western Australia.
- **Small businesses form the backbone of the local economy** - Christmas Island has a small business base with around 51 GST-registered businesses, many of which employ fewer than five workers.
- **Tourism remains an important contributor** - Tourism supports around 8.4% of total employment, with visitor activity reflected in air passenger movements that have recovered above pre-COVID levels.

What it means for regional development?

- **Diversification opportunities** - Reducing reliance on a small number of industries, particularly mining and government services, will be important for improving economic resilience.
- **Support for small local businesses** - With many enterprises employing only a handful of staff, business support, capability development, and access to markets can help strengthen the local business base.
- **Building on tourism and service industries** - Nature-based tourism and visitor services provide opportunities for employment and business growth.

- **Skills and workforce development** - Strengthening pathways into priority sectors such as construction, tourism, and public services can help support local employment opportunities.

Cocos (Keeling) Islands

OUR RESIDENTS

Cocos (Keeling) Islands has a community shaped by strong family and cultural connections. An ageing population and distinctive household structures introduce new challenges for service provision and regional development.

OUR RESIDENTS – WHO LIVES HERE AND HOW DO THEY LIVE

This chapter explores who lives on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

It seeks to answer questions such as

- How is the population growing?
- What is the demographic profile?
- How do our residents live?

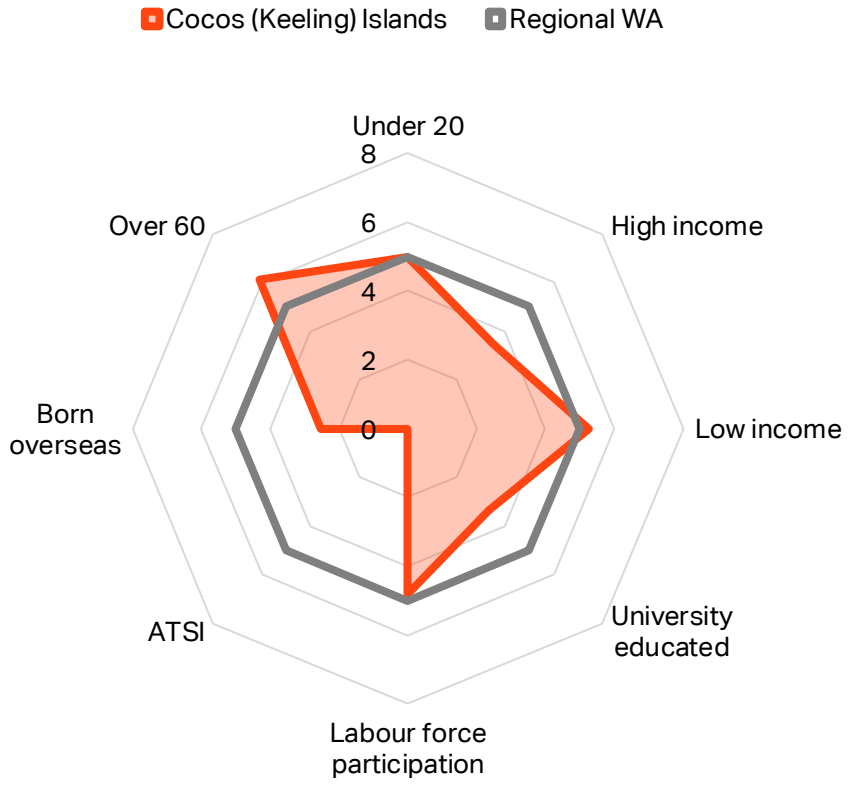
When compared to the regional WA average, Cocos (Keeling) Islands' resident base is generally characterised as having:

- Lower share of under 20 year olds;
- Higher share of over 60 year olds;
- Significantly fewer overseas born;
- No residents identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;
- Similar rates of participation in the labour force;
- Lower share of university educated;
- Similar share of low income earners; and
- Lower share of high income earners.

Cocos (Keeling) Islands tends to attract and attain those who have family or cultural ties to the Islands which contributes the volatile population change, higher share of older residents and lower share of overseas born residents.

How do we compare?

Resident indicators to regional benchmark



Source: ABS Census, 2021; ABS Regional Population Growth, 2025

Population Growth

Small population drives large swings in growth

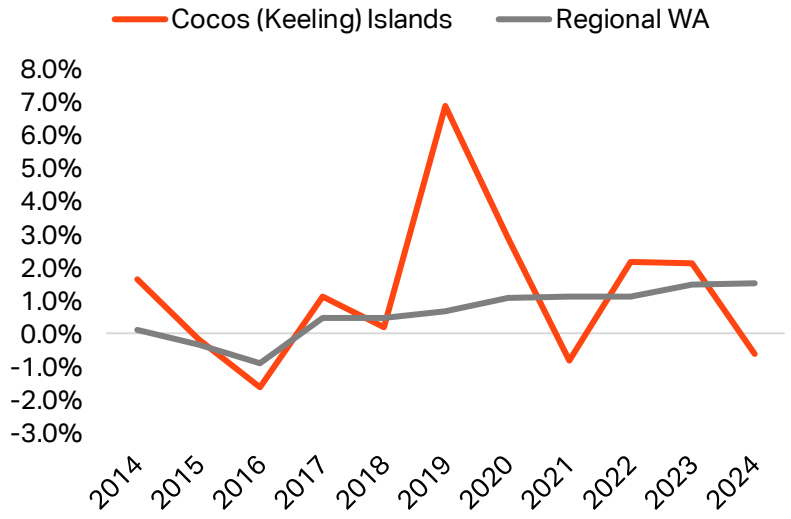
Cocos (Keeling) Islands was home to an estimated 625 people in 2024. The resident population has grown by 34 in the last five years, a growth rate of 1.1% p.a. This was lower than the regional WA average of 1.3% p.a. and the Islands' average over the preceding five years (1.3%). However, given the small population, an increase or decline of only a few people can result in considerable percentage growth.

1.1%

Average annual growth last five years

Volatile population growth

Average annual change %



Source: ABS Regional Population Growth

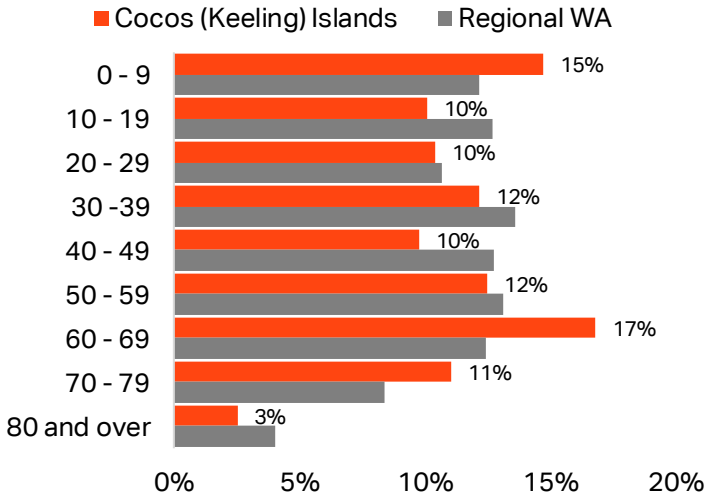
Age Profile

Higher share of older residents

The median age of Cocos (Keeling) Islands residents was 40 in 2024, inline with 40 years for regional WA. The largest cohort was people aged 60-69 years, representing 17% of all residents. This was a clear divergence from regional WA (12.5%). The other main difference was a higher proportion of young children representing 14.7% in 2024 compared to 12.2% for regional WA.

How do we compare?

% Share of population, 2024



Source: ABS Regional Population Growth

40

Median Age

+2

Growth in 80+ last decade

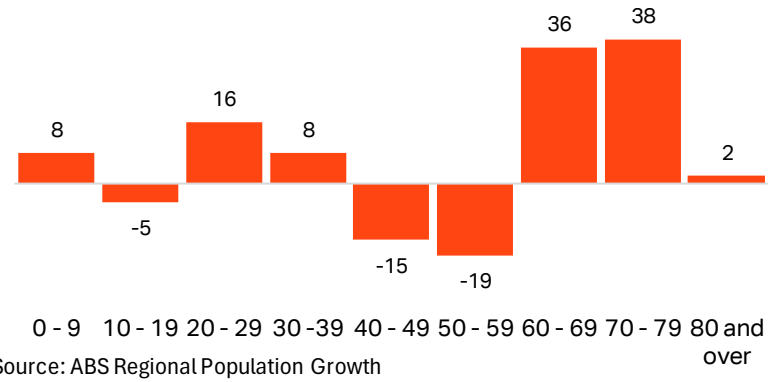
Ageing population with growing older cohorts

Cocos (Keeling) Islands is being shaped by the ageing of the baby boomer population. The number of residents aged 60-79 years grew by an estimated 74 in the decade to 2024. Their share of the population grew from 18% to 27.8% in this period.

Most other age groups also saw a small increase in population between 2014 and 2024. However there was a significant decline in those aged 40-59 years, a peak employment age group.

How are we changing?

Change in numbers, 2014 to 2024



Source: ABS Regional Population Growth

Age and Sex Profile

Male and female age profiles diverge, reflecting older male cohorts and younger female family groups

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands population is spread across both younger and older age groups, with several cohorts contributing strongly to the overall structure. In 2024, males aged 60–64 represented the largest single cohort (12%), followed by males aged 10–14 (9%) and males aged 0–4 (8%). Among females, the largest groups were 5–9 years (10%) and 35–39 years (9%), reflecting the presence of families and working-age adults in the community.

Since 2014, some working-age groups have declined in share. The most notable change occurred among males aged 50–54, whose share fell from 11% to 7%, alongside declines in males aged 30–34 (9% to 4%) and males aged 45–49 (6% to 2%). These changes reflect the volatility of population structure in a small community, where migration and employment opportunities can significantly influence the size of particular age groups.

The data also shows a gradual increase in older residents. In particular, the share of males aged 60–64 increased from 8% in 2014 to 12% in 2024, while females aged 65–69 doubled from 4% to 8%. Growth is also evident in the 70–79 age groups, indicating a steadily ageing population as long-term residents remain on the islands.

Female 5-9 year olds

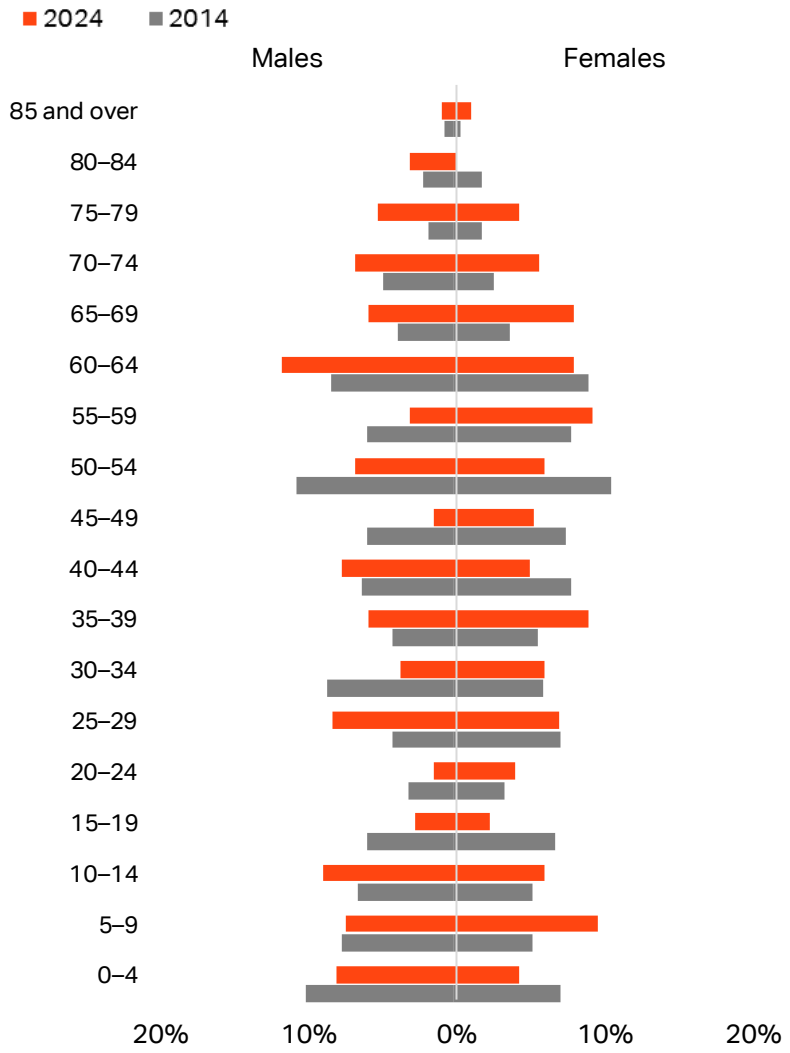
Top growth in the share of total population

Male 30-34 year olds

Top decrease in the share of total population

Age-Sex Pyramid

% of total population



Source: ABS Estimated Resident Population, 2025

Household types

Family households dominate in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands

In 2021, the most common type of household was couples with children, representing 37% of all households. This was above the regional WA average (24%).

Looking at sub-categories, couples with young children were the most common, followed by middle aged couples and other households (eg sibling households).

The greatest divergence from the regional WA average was a:

- higher share of couples with young children
- higher share of middle-aged couples without children
- Significantly lower share of lone person households of all ages
- lower share of young couples without children.

This highlights the role that strong family and cultural ties play in the choosing of Cocos (Keeling) Islands as a place of residence. The lower proportion of young couples without children may signal slowing population growth in the future (as this group are the most likely to experience family increase) however there may be cultural practices influencing household formation.

27%

Couples without children

Regional WA (26%)

37%

Couples with children

Regional WA (24%)

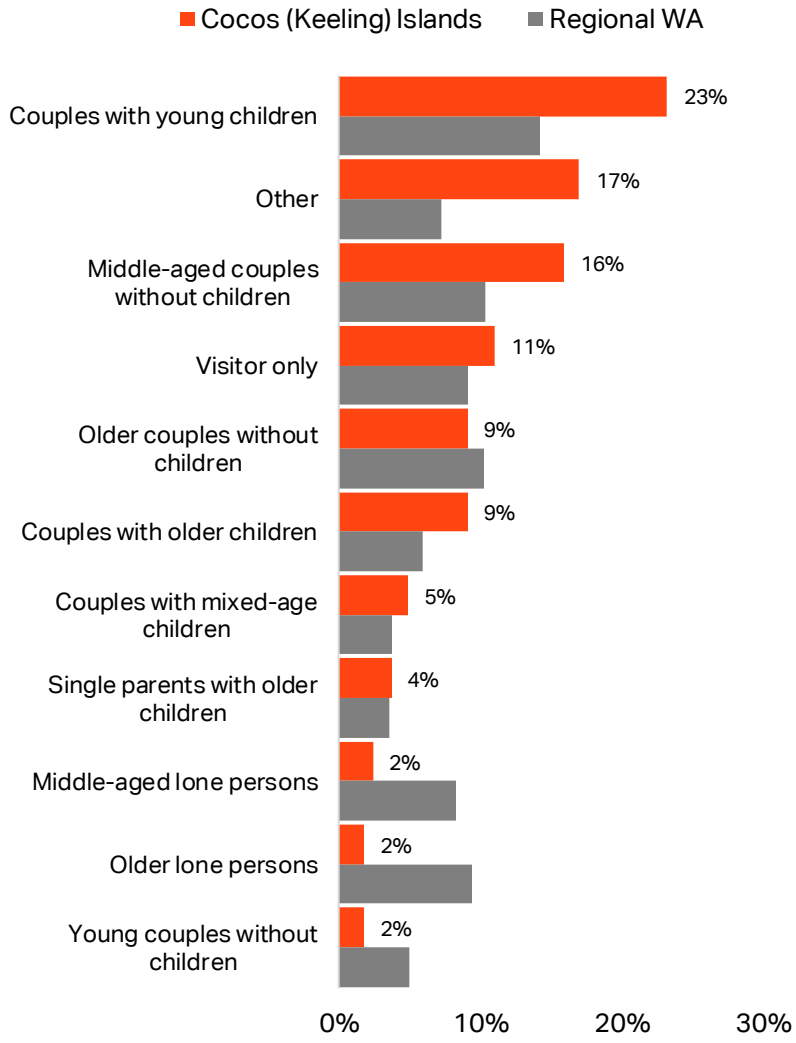
4%

Lone person households

Regional WA (23%)

How do we compare?

% Share of households, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Household types contd.

Household structure shifting toward older and extended households

The greatest change in household types between 2016 and 2021 was a large increase in 'Other' households (+25, or +15% in share of households). Other household types can include family relationships such as siblings, aunt/uncle and cousins.

The largest fall was in young couples without children (-7; -4.8%) and couples with older children (-7; -5.5%) . These declines were larger than the regional WA average (-0.5% and -0.4% respectively)

+1.8%

Growth in share of households that are older lone persons

Regional WA (+1.2%)

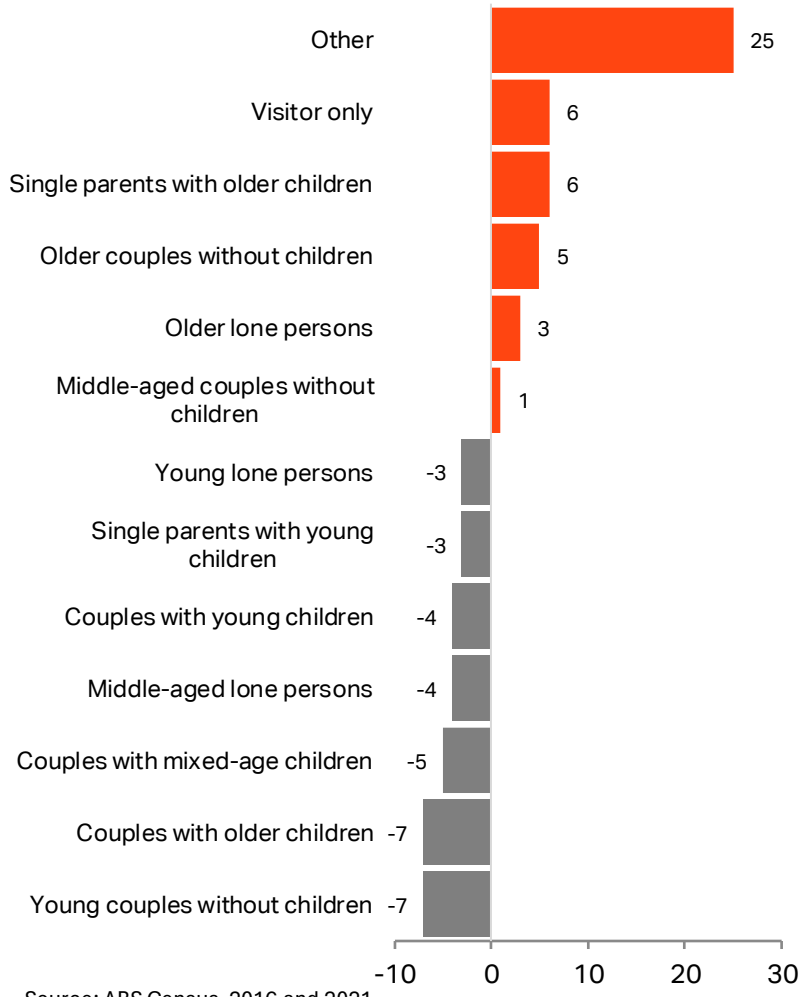
-4.6%

Growth in share of households that are couples with young children

Regional WA (-1.6%)

How are we changing?

Change in households, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

Engagement

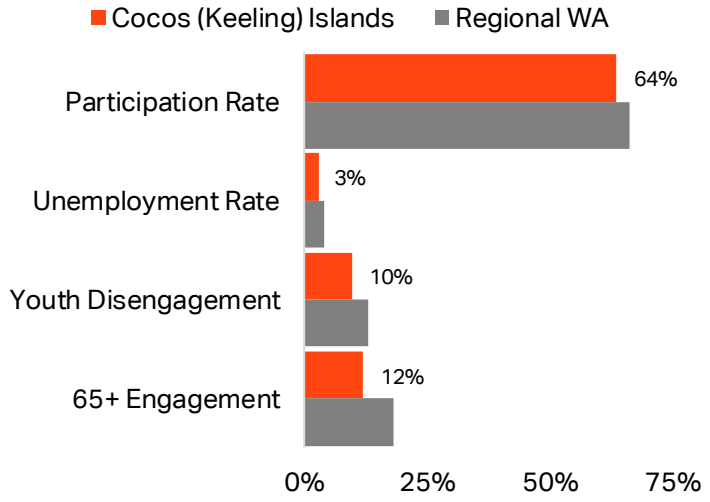
Labour force participation broadly in line with regional WA

Labour force participation in Cocos (Keeling) Islands (63.6% of residents aged 15 or over) was marginally lower than the regional WA average in 2021 (66.3%).

However, within the labour force there were considerable differences between Cocos and the regional WA average. Youth disengagement rates were lower with 10% of 15-24 year olds stating they were not engaged in either work or study in 2021, compared to 13%. Engagement amongst older residents is a little lower than the regional WA average, with Cocos (Keeling) Islands residents retiring earlier than their peers.

How do we compare?

% Share



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

64%

Participation Rate

Regional WA (66%)

10%

Youth Disengagement

Regional WA (13%)

+3.2%

Change in Participation

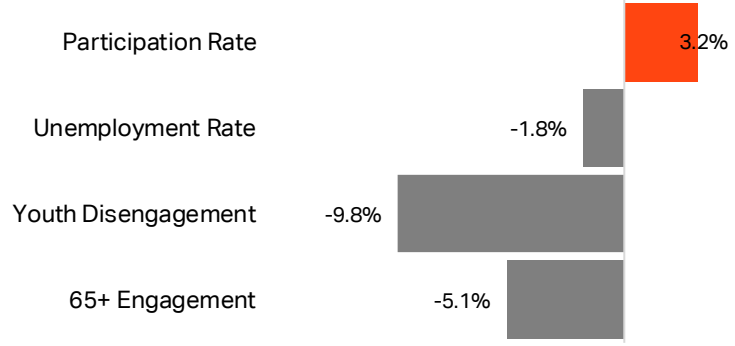
Regional WA (-0.6%)

Participation rising as unemployment and youth disengagement fall

Labour force participation in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands increased between 2016 and 2021, rising by around 3.2 percentage points. Over the same period, unemployment and youth disengagement both declined. Some of this improvement may be linked to growth in service industries such as accommodation, food services and transport, which recorded increases in employment between 2016 and 2021. The recovery in visitor activity and air passenger movements in recent years may also be supporting employment opportunities in these sectors, contributing to stronger labour market engagement.

How are we changing?

Change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

Education

Lower levels of higher education attainment than regional WA

Of those Cocos (Keeling) Islands residents who stated their education level*, 39% had a formal post-school qualifications, considerably lower than the regional WA average (53%).

Only 2% of the resident population were attending higher education facilities compared to 3.3% for regional WA. This may be influenced by limited higher education access for those living in Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

12%

Degree Educated

Regional WA (16%)

2%

Attending higher education

Regional WA (3.3%)

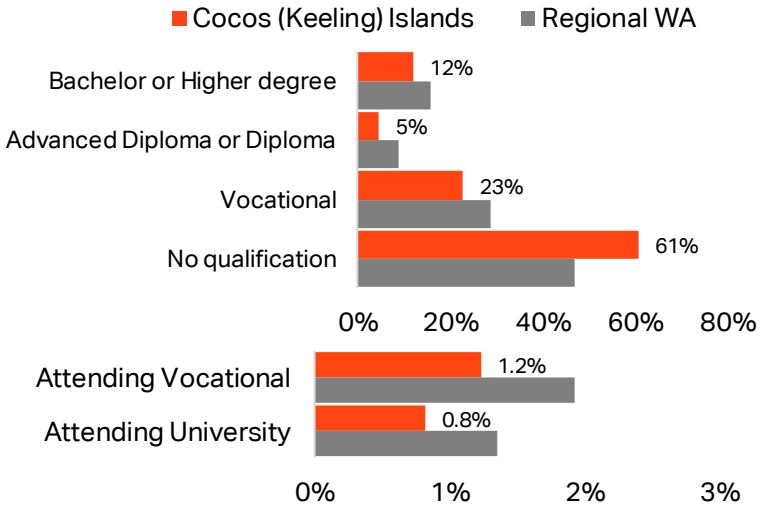
-1.7%

Growth in share of residents with degrees

Regional WA (1.9%)

How do we compare?

% Share of 15+, 2021



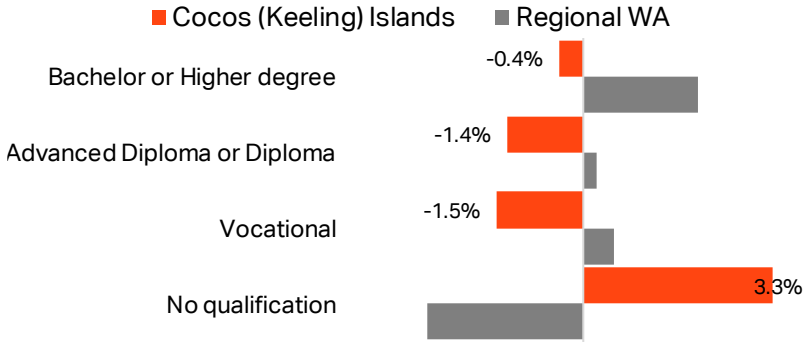
Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Formal qualification levels declining since 2016

Unlike most of Australia, Cocos (Keeling) Islands has experienced a decrease in residents who have formal qualifications. The share fell by 3.3% between 2016 and 2021, while the share increased across regional WA (2.7%).

How are we changing?

Change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census, 2016 and 2021

*Please note, 25% of residents aged 15+ years did not state their education level

Income levels

Fewer high-income earners than regional WA

Cocos (Keeling) Islands residents are generally medium income earners, earning between $850 and $1,600 per week in 2021 (31%). There are considerably fewer high-income earners in comparison to the regional WA average (17% compared to 24%).

Between 2016 and 2021 there was a decline in the proportion of individual earners in the lowest quartile, from 32.3% to 25.8%. This was dissimilar to the trend across regional WA where there was an increase in low-income earners.

Unfortunately, more recent income data has been suppressed by the Australia Bureau of Statistics to protect confidentiality.

$2,414

Median weekly household income

Regional WA ($1,368)

+0.9

Growth in share of individuals in highest quartile

Regional WA (-1.2%)

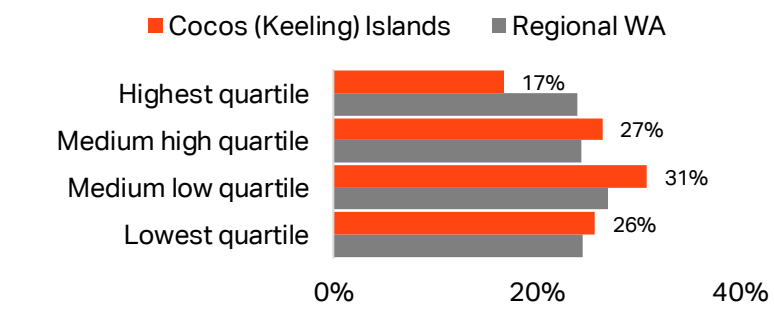
Higher household incomes due to larger households

There is a large share of high-income households across Cocos (Keeling) Islands – 32% of households were earning more than $3,000 per week. While individual incomes are lower than average, household incomes are higher due to the larger household size (and therefore more earners) in Cocos.

There was a shift in income patterns between 2016 and 2021. There was a decrease in the share of low and medium low-income households (-8.8 percentage points) and a significant increase in households in the medium highest quartile (+9.1 percentage points).

How do we compare?

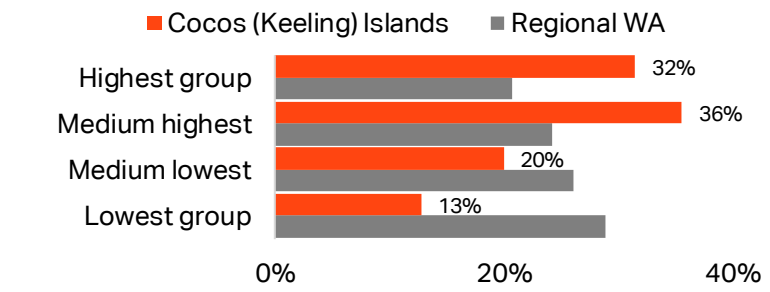
% residents, earning within national income quartiles, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

How do we compare?

% households, income quartiles, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Household tenure

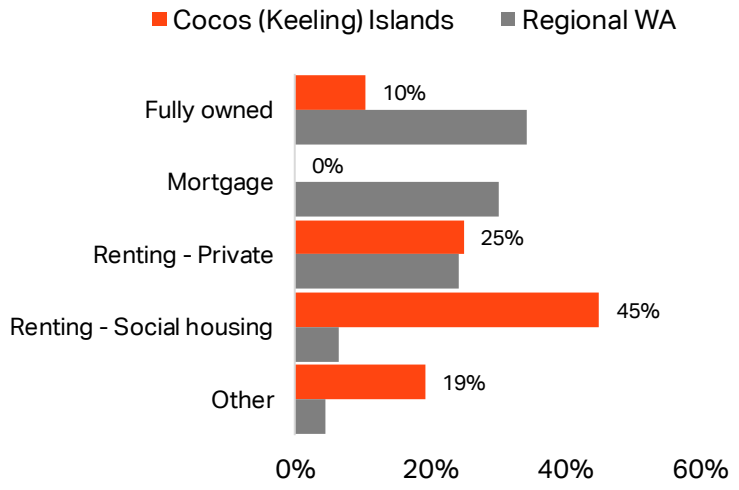
Unique tenure patterns dominated by social housing

The tenure patterns evident on Cocos (Keeling) Islands are a reflection of the unique land ownership and governance structures.

Very few households own their own home, with the majority securing housing from various levels of Government, community providers or employers.

How do we compare?

% Share of households, 2021



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

10%

Fully own their house

Regional WA (31%)

+0.2%

Change in fully owned homes

Regional WA (+1.3%)

Our Residents – Key Findings

- **Population change can appear volatile** - With a small population, changes of only a few residents can lead to large swings in growth rates. The Islands' population has grown modestly in recent years, but trends should be interpreted cautiously.
- **An ageing population** - The median age is 42.1, slightly older than the regional WA average. The number of residents aged 60 and over has increased significantly over the past decade, while there has been a decline in people aged 40–59.
- **Family and extended households are common** - Households are strongly shaped by family structures and cultural ties. Couples with children are the most common household type, and there are relatively few lone-person households compared with regional WA.
- **Cultural and community ties shape the population** - A large share of residents speak Malay at home and many households include extended family members. These cultural and family connections influence household structure and patterns of residence.
- **Labour force engagement is relatively strong** - Participation rates are broadly similar to regional WA, with lower levels of youth disengagement. Labour market participation has improved since 2016 as unemployment and disengagement declined.
- **Lower levels of higher education attainment** - Residents are less likely to hold university qualifications than the regional WA average, and the share of residents with formal qualifications declined between 2016 and 2021.
- **Household incomes are relatively high despite lower individual incomes** - While there are fewer high-income individual earners, larger household sizes mean household incomes are relatively strong.
- **Unique housing arrangements** - Housing tenure reflects the Islands' governance and land ownership structures, with most residents living in housing provided by government, community organisations or employers rather than owning their homes.

What it means for regional development?

- **Support an ageing population,** including services and housing that enable older residents to remain in the community.
- **Retain younger residents**, particularly through employment and education pathways.
- **Support family and multi-generational households**, recognising the prevalence of extended family living arrangements on the Islands.
- **Strengthen local skills and education pathways**, including improved access to vocational training and remote higher education options.
- **Plan housing within unique tenure arrangements**, reflecting the strong role of government and community-provided housing.

OUR ECONOMY

Cocos (Keeling) Islands has a small and highly specialised economy shaped by government services, tourism and essential infrastructure. Its remote location and limited private sector create unique challenges for economic growth and employment.

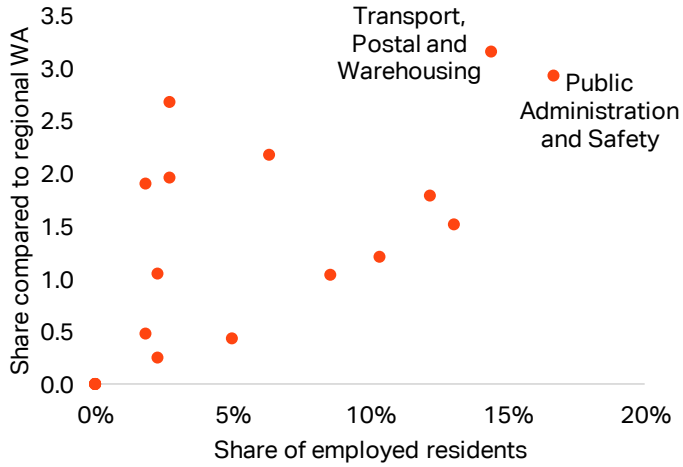
Employment profile

Public administration dominates employment, with transport highly specialised

Employment on Cocos (Keeling) Islands is concentrated in a small number of industries. Public Administration and Safety is the largest employer, reflecting the important role of government services in supporting the Islands' population and infrastructure. Transport, Postal and Warehousing is the most over-represented industry compared with regional WA, highlighting the significance of logistics, freight and connectivity for a remote island community. Other service industries such as healthcare, retail and construction also play key roles in supporting residents.

How do we compare?

% share of employed residents, 2021



Source: ABS Census 2021

* Employment in Agriculture can fluctuate considerably depending on production conditions

64.1%

Full-time Employed

Regional WA (58.7%)

Public Admin & Safety

Largest industry of employment

Transport, Postal & Warehousing

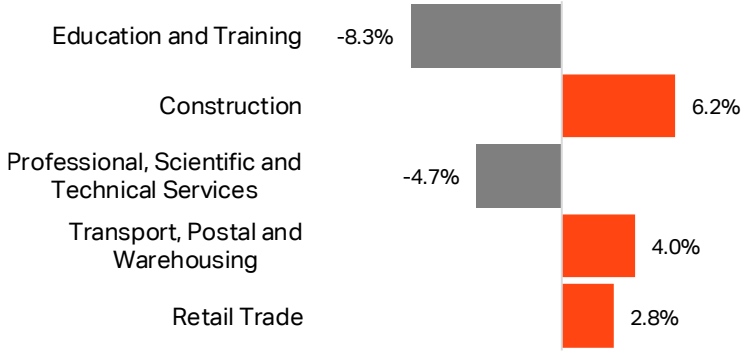
Most over-represented industry of employment

Employment growth strongest in construction and transport

Changes in industry employment between 2016 and 2021 indicate growth in construction, transport, postal and warehousing, and retail trade. These increases likely reflect infrastructure works, local development activity and the services needed to support the Islands' population. In contrast, employment declined in industries such as education and professional services. Overall, employment growth has been concentrated in industries linked to construction, logistics and local services.

How are we changing?

Top industries by change in % shares, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS Census 2021

OUR ECONOMY – WHAT DRIVES IT AND WHO WORKS HERE

This chapter explores the makeup of Cocos (Keeling) Island's local economy. It seeks to answer questions such as

- How is the economy growing?
- What industries drive economic activity?
- what are the characteristics of the workforce?

When compared with the regional WA average, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands economy is generally characterised by:

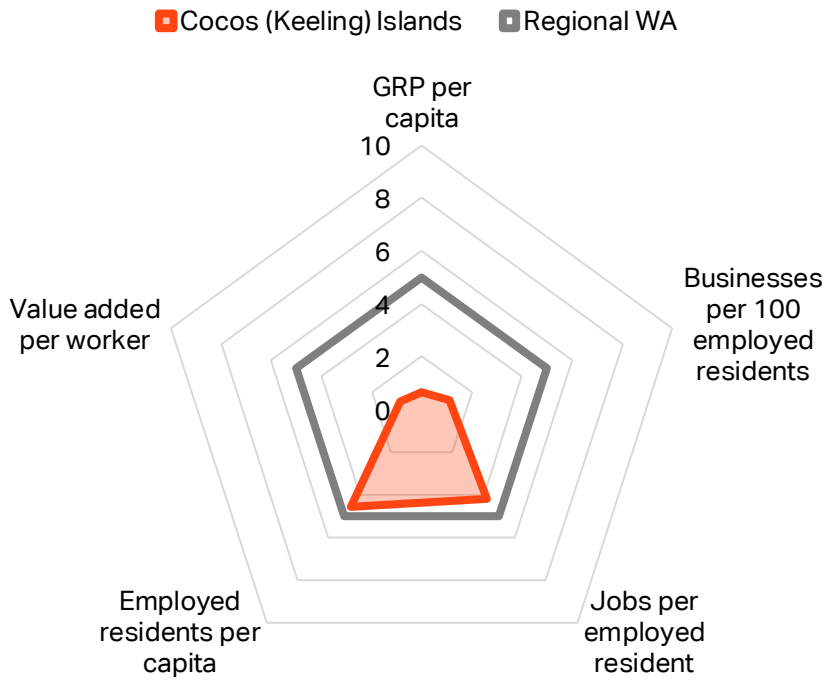
- Lower GRP per capita;
- Lower value added per worker;
- Similar levels of employment of residents per capita;
- Less jobs available per employed resident; and
- A smaller business base relative to the workforce.

These patterns reflect the Islands' small and remote economy, where economic activity is concentrated in government services, transport and local service industries. The role of public administration, logistics and essential services is particularly significant in supporting the resident population and maintaining connectivity with the mainland.

Limited private sector activity and a small local market also influence the structure of the economy, with relatively few businesses and employment opportunities compared with larger mainland regions.

How do we compare?

Economic indicators to regional benchmark, 2021



Source: NIEIR, 2025, ABS, 2025

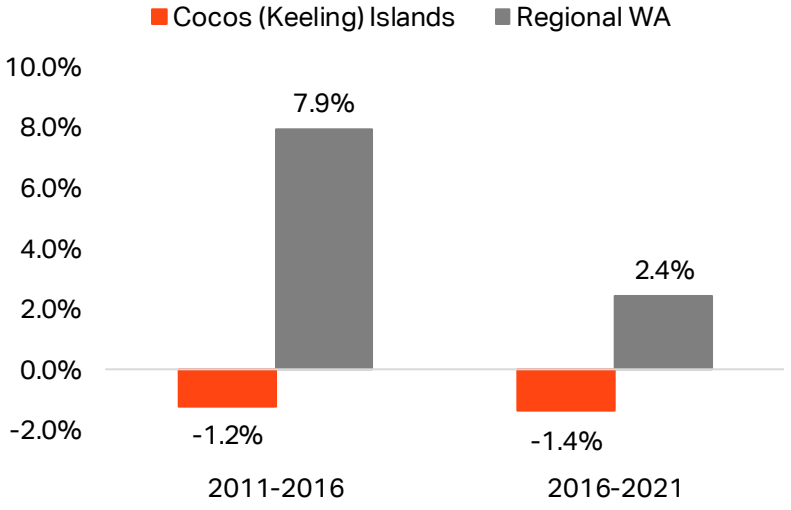
Economic Growth

Economic output declining over the past decade

Economic output on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands has declined in recent years. Between 2011 and 2016 the local economy contracted slightly, and this trend continued between 2016 and 2021. This contrasts with regional Western Australia, which experienced positive growth over the same periods. The Islands' economy remains relatively small, with total GRP estimated at around $29 million, ranking among the lowest in regional WA.

Persistent Economic Decline on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands

Average annual change %



Source: ABS Census; NIEIR, 2025

$29M GRP

101st highest in regional WA (out of 107)

-1.4%

Average growth last five years

24th

Lowest growth in regional WA

Population

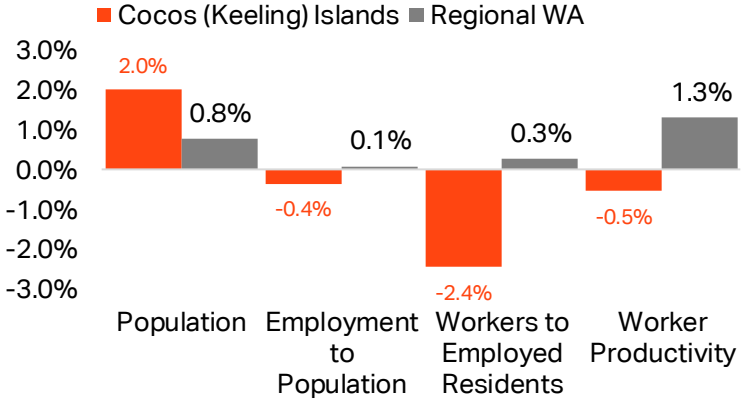
Largest economic drivers

Population growth supports the economy but other growth drivers has fallen

A simple component analysis suggests that population growth has been the main contributor to economic activity on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. However, other factors have constrained overall growth. The number of workers relative to employed residents declined, and worker productivity also fell over the period. Together these trends have contributed to the overall decline in economic output, highlighting the challenges of sustaining economic growth in a small and remote economy.

Economic growth components

% Contribution to economic growth, 2016 to 2021



Source: ABS & NIEIR, 2025

* The three P's (population, participation and productivity) is a common simplistic method to explore what is driving economic growth at a national level. For LGAs, it is useful to add a fourth measure of employment capacity (ratio of local jobs to employed workers) as unlike national economics there can be a big difference between employed residents and local worker numbers.

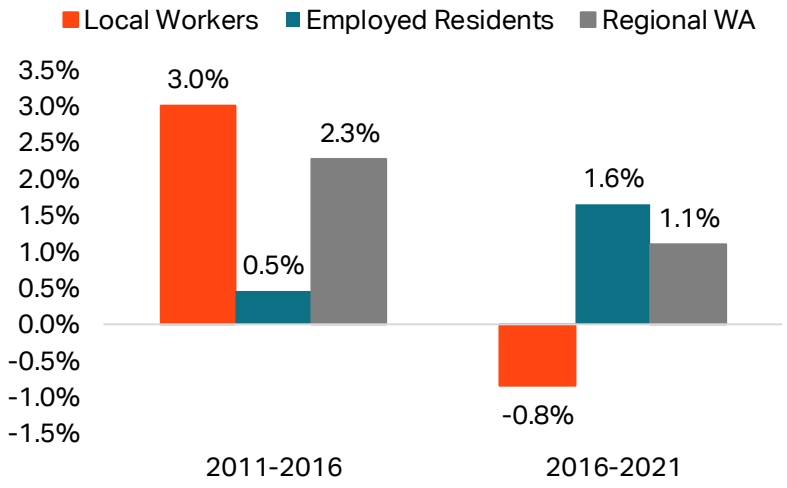
Local employment

Local jobs declined while resident employment increased

Local employment on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands declined slightly between 2016 and 2021, with the number of jobs falling from 240 to around 230. Over the same period, the number of employed residents increased, suggesting more residents were working but not necessarily in jobs located on the Islands. This may reflect temporary disruptions to local employment during the COVID period, as well as the small and specialised nature of the local labour market where some roles may be filled by non-resident workers or residents working elsewhere.

Jobs decline over the last inter-censal period

Average annual change %



Source: ABS Census

230 workers

50st highest in regional WA

-0.8%

Average growth 2016-2021

30th

Lowest growth in regional WA

2.0%

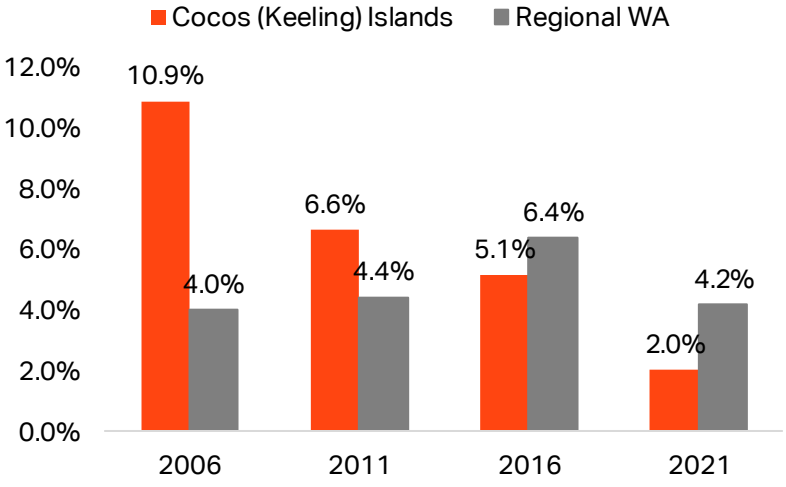
15th lowest Unemployment Rate

Unemployment has fallen significantly over time

Despite the limited number of local jobs, labour market conditions have improved over time. Census data shows unemployment rates have fallen substantially since the mid-2000s, declining to around 2% in 2021, well below the regional WA average. This suggests relatively strong labour force engagement among residents, even as local employment growth has been modest.

Fall in unemployment over the last two decades

Unemployment rate as at the time of Census



Source: ABS Census

Industry Structure

Employment concentrated in government and essential services

Employment on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands is concentrated in a small number of industries that support the resident population and maintain essential services. Public Administration and Safety is the largest employer, reflecting the strong role of government services on the Islands. Other key employing sectors include education and training, transport and logistics, accommodation and food services, and construction, which support both residents and visitors.

Top Employing Industries	Top Value Industries
Public Admin. & Safety	Construction
Education & Training	Public Admin. & Safety
Transport, Postal & Warehousing	Transport, Postal & Warehousing
Accom. & Food	Utilities
Construction	Education & Training

Source: NIEIR, 2025

Public Admin & Safety
Employees the most workers

Construction
Contributes the most $$ value

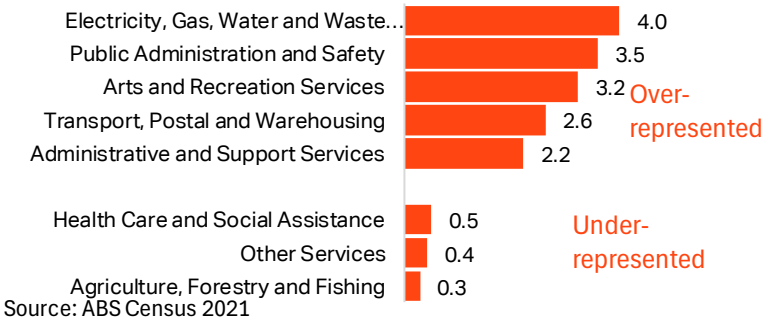
Utilities
Most over-represented sub-industry

Utilities and government services highly specialised industries

Employment on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands is more concentrated in several specialised industries compared with regional WA. Utilities, public administration and transport have significantly higher employment shares, reflecting the importance of government services, infrastructure and logistics in a remote island economy.

How do we compare?

Location Quotient*



Source: ABS Census 2021

Over-represented Sub-industries

Library and Other Information Services; Defence; Water Transport; Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage Services; Heritage Activities; Other Transport; Transport Support Services; Retail Trade, nfd; Public Administration; Waste Collection, Treatment and Disposal Services

Source: ABS Census 2021

*Location Quotients are a simple way of seeing which are the specialist industries in an area relative to a wider region. For example, an LQ of 1.2 means the share of industry jobs in the region is 1.2 times more than that industry job's share in the wider region

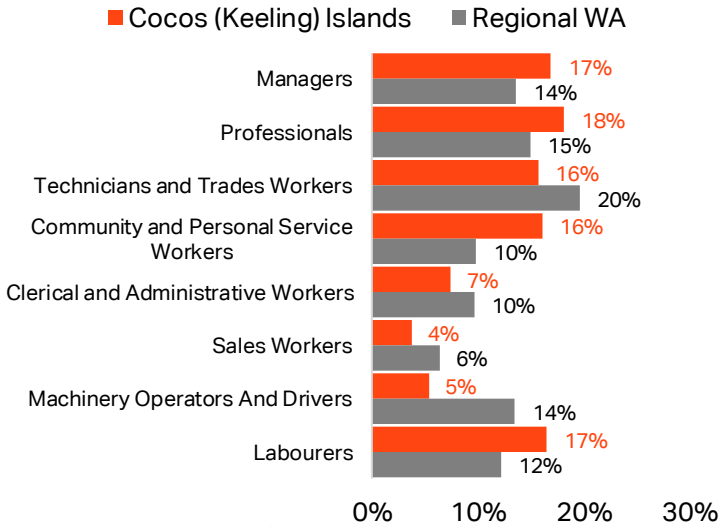
Workforce characteristics

Service and labour occupations more common than in regional WA

The occupational profile of workers on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands differs from the regional WA average, with higher shares of service and labour occupations. Personal carers and assistants are the most over-represented roles, while labourers and tourism-related jobs are also more common. In contrast, professional and technical occupations have smaller shares of employment.

How do we compare?

% Share of workers



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Education Aides

Most common occupation (followed by Handypersons and Retail Managers)

Personal Carers and Assistants

Most over-represented occupation

Workforce slightly older with lower qualification levels

Compared with regional WA, the workforce is slightly older, less qualified, more likely to work part-time. While individual incomes on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands are lower than the regional Western Australia average, household incomes remain relatively strong due to larger household sizes. In addition, the Islands' housing system is dominated by social housing, meaning housing costs are often lower than in mainland housing markets. As a result, income measures alone may not fully reflect living standards or disadvantage in the local context.

Key Workforce Characteristics

- **42** Median Age *(42 years)*
- **19%** Degree educated *(24%)*
- **54% / 46%** Male / Female *(57% / 43%)*
- **67%** Full-time *(70%)*
- **19%** Born Overseas *(26%)*
- **$52,937** Median Income *($72,713)*

Source: ABS Census 2021

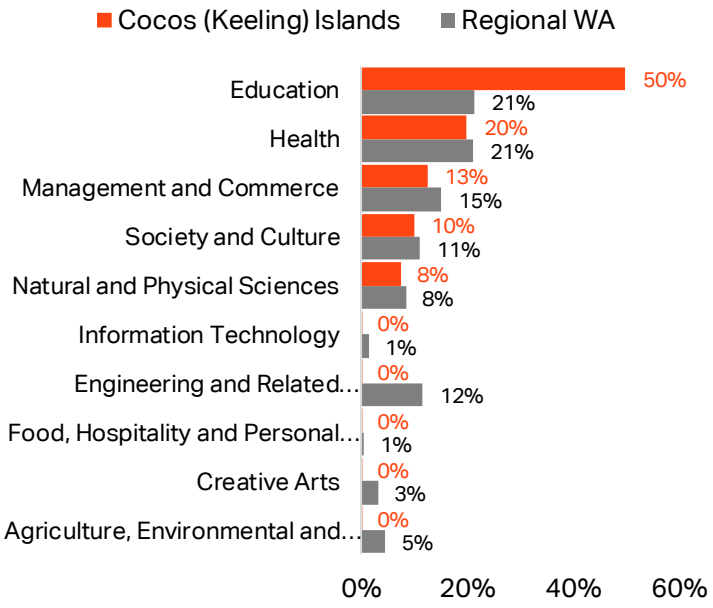
Workforce skills

Teaching qualifications dominate degree-level skills

Degree-qualified workers on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands are heavily concentrated in education fields. Teaching degrees account for around half of all degree qualifications, a much higher share than in regional WA. Other degree fields such as health, management and commerce are less represented, reflecting the Islands' small labour market and the strong role of education services.

How do we compare?

% Share of workers with degrees



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Teacher Education

Most common degree

(followed by Medical Studies, Business Management and Sales and Marketing)

Business and Management

Most common Certificate/ Diploma

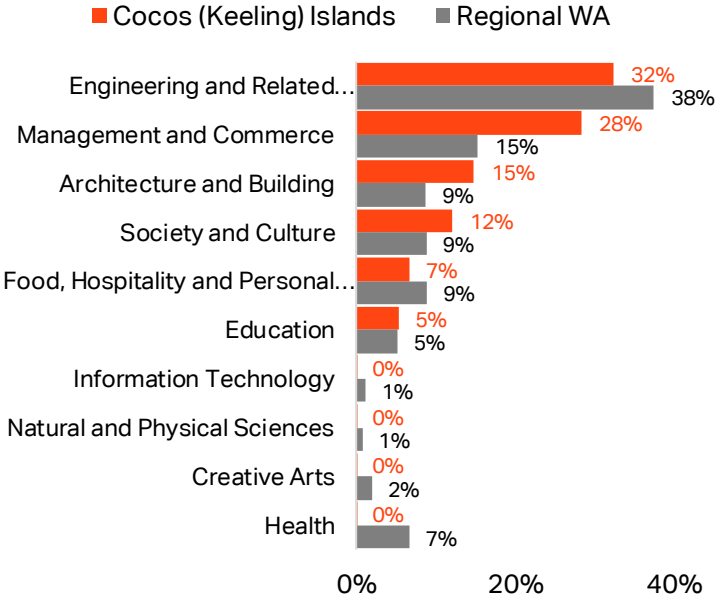
(followed by Electrical and Electronic Engineering and Technology and Building,)

Vocational skills focused on trades and business

Certificate and diploma qualifications are most commonly in engineering and building trades, followed by business and management fields. This reflects the importance of trades, construction and service industries in the local economy, while some other qualification fields have relatively small representation.

How do we compare?

% Share of workers with certificate/diploma qualifications



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Registered businesses

Small business base concentrated in retail and hospitality

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands has a very small business base, with around 11 GST-registered businesses recorded in 2023/24. Most businesses operate in local service industries, particularly retail trade, accommodation and food services, and other personal services. Construction businesses are also present, reflecting the need for local building and maintenance services in a remote community.

The relatively small number of businesses and lower share of employing businesses (28%) reflects the Islands' small population and limited local market, with most economic activity focused on providing services for residents and visitors.

Top Industries for Registered Businesses

- Construction – 2
- Retail Trade – 3
- Accommodation and food services – 3
- Other services* – 3

11

GST Registered Businesses 2023/24

28%

Employing businesses

Regional WA (40%)

Source: ABS, Counts of Australian Businesses, 2025

*Other services include repair and maintenance, household services (e.g. hairdressing, cleaning).

**Location Quotients are a simple way of seeing which are the specialist industries in an area relative to a wider region. For example, an LQ of 1.2 means the share of industry jobs in the region is 1.2 times more than that industry job's share in the wider region

Investment pipeline

Building approvals remain modest

The value of building approvals on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands has remained relatively modest in recent years, reflecting the Islands' small population and limited development pipeline. Building approvals averaged around $177,000 per year over the five years to 2023/24, with the majority of value coming from residential development (79%), well above the regional benchmark.

$177M

Average value of building approvals, five years to 2023/24

79%

Share of value that is residential

Regional QLD (58%)

Retail & wholesale

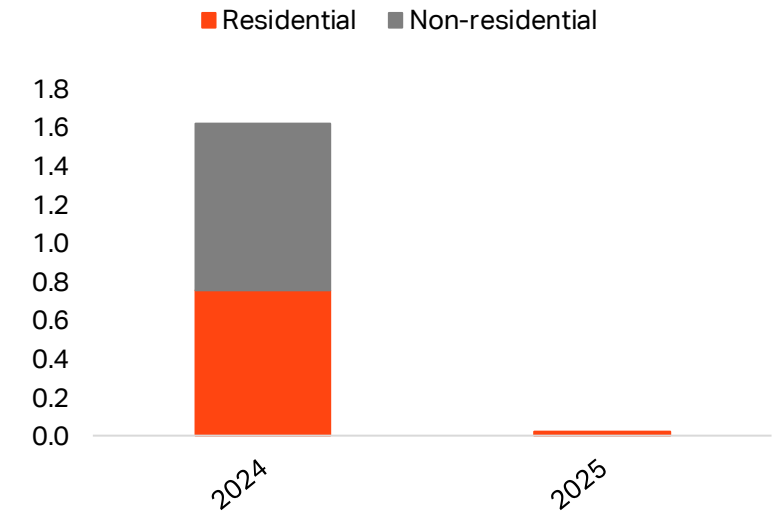
Largest value of non-residential

Investment focused on infrastructure and visitor facilities

Recent non-residential investment has been concentrated in a small number of project categories. The largest approvals were for transport buildings, followed by short-term accommodation and other industrial buildings. This pattern suggests development activity has been focused on supporting infrastructure and visitor accommodation.

Building approvals

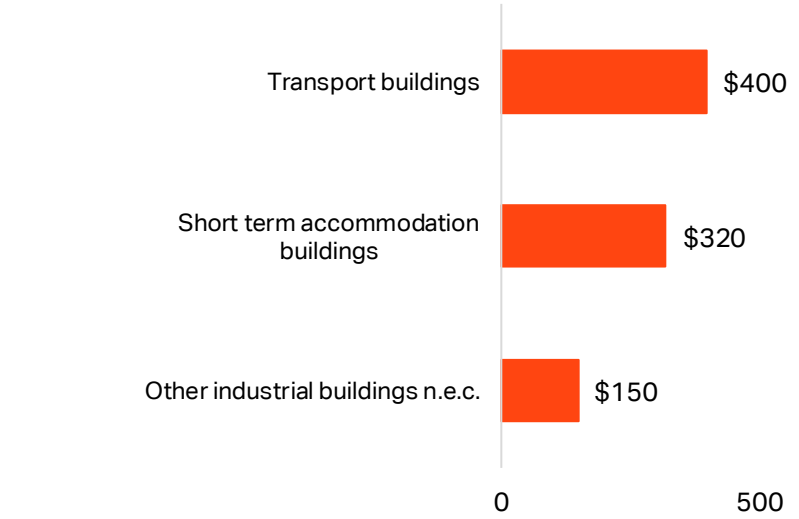
Financial year value approved $M



Source: ABS, Building Approvals, 2025

Non-residential approvals

FY2024 and FY2025 value approved $'000



Source: ABS, Building Approvals, 2025

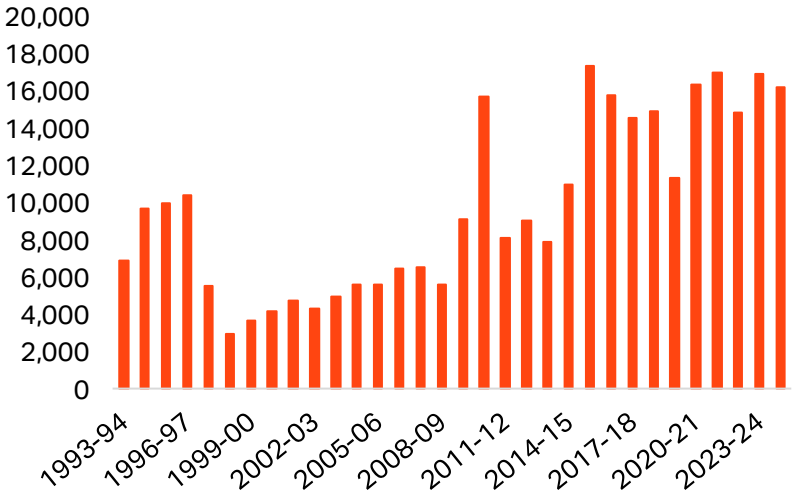
Tourism and hospitality

Tourism and hospitality plays a key role in the local economy

Tourism and hospitality is an important contributor to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands economy, supporting local employment and visitor-related services. Air passenger activity has strengthened in recent years, with air passenger movements reaching around 16,200 in 2024/25, reflecting a recovery following pandemic disruptions. The continued growth in passenger numbers highlights the role of tourism and visitor travel in supporting local businesses, services, and employment across the Islands.

Passenger Numbers Recover Strongly After COVID

Air Passenger Movements



Source: BITRE, 2025

13.9%

Total employment supported by tourism and hospitality

Regional WA (6.6%)

16.2K

Air passenger movements in 2024/25

*Tourism is not defined as a single industry within ANZSIC classifications. In this report, tourism and hospitality employment is estimated by selecting relevant tourism-related occupations from the ABS Census and aggregating them to represent jobs associated with tourism and hospitality activity across multiple industries.

Our Economy – Key Findings

- **A small economy facing recent decline** – Economic output has fallen since 2016, with GRP estimated at around $29M, reflecting the Islands' small and remote economic base.
- **Government services dominate employment** – Public Administration and Safety is the largest employer, alongside education, transport and other essential services.
- **A small but highly engaged labour market** – Local jobs declined slightly between 2016 and 2021, but unemployment has fallen to around 2%, indicating strong labour force participation.
- **Service and labour occupations more common** – Roles in personal care, tourism and labouring are more prevalent than in regional WA, while professional roles are less common.
- **Skills concentrated in education and trades** – Teaching degrees dominate among tertiary qualifications, while vocational skills are focused on construction and technical trades.
- **A very small business base** – Around 11 GST-registered businesses operate on the Islands, mostly in retail, hospitality and other local services.
- **Investment levels remain modest** – Development activity is limited and largely residential, with non-residential investment focused on infrastructure and visitor facilities.
- **Tourism plays a key economic role** – Visitor activity supports local services and employment, with air passenger movements recovering strongly in recent years.

What it means for regional development?

- **Strengthen economic resilience** – Encourage diversification beyond government services and a small number of industries to support long-term economic stability.
- **Support local business development** – Provide support for small enterprises, including business capability programs and access to markets.
- **Build skills for local industries** – Strengthen education and training pathways linked to construction, tourism, logistics and public services.

- **Leverage tourism opportunities –** Continue investment in tourism infrastructure and visitor experiences to support local jobs and businesses.

Using spatial intelligence to bring strategic insight and clarity to your most important planning decisions

Contact us

(03) 9417 2205 info@id.com.au id.com.au