

financial
counselling
australia



Annual Report

2019
2020

Contents

Message from the Chair and CEO	3
About Us	5
Our purpose.....	5
Our members.....	5
Our vision and goals.....	6
Our Board and Representative Council	6
Our staff at 30th June	8
A Decade of Progress	9
Year in Review.....	13
The first half of the year.....	13
The second half of the year	14
2019 – 2020 at a glance	15
Sylvan Review	16
Responding to the Bushfires	18
Coordination of the Sector’s Response	18
Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Support Line	18
Responding to COVID-19	19
Goals and Impact.....	21
Building and supporting the profession	21
Advocating for fair treatment.....	23
Raising the profile	24
Increasing access to financial counselling	25
Support for the Jan Pentland Foundation.....	26
Jan Pentland Dinner	26
Jan Pentland Prize	26
Jan Pentland Dinner via Zoom.....	27
Financial statements	29

Message from the Chair and CEO



▲ Carmel Franklin (Chair)



▲ Fiona Guthrie (CEO)

Financial Counselling Australia has come a long way since 2009, the year that the Federal Government renewed funding for the organisation. The profession more broadly has also come a long way. This annual report reflects on that decade of progress as well as the past financial year.

2019–20 was again one where we needed to respond quickly to a changing world.

In October 2019, the Federal Government released the much-anticipated independent review of financial counselling, conducted by Louise Sylvan AM. We welcomed its key recommendations: that both governments and industry should fund financial counselling and that this funding be managed by an independent body. We have appreciated the constructive approach taken by the Federal Government and Department of Social Services staff in discussing the review's potential implications. Additional funding also saw FCA's headcount grow to fulfill the tasks our stakeholders asked of us.

In August 2019 we released *Who is Making Australians Bankrupt*, a joint report with the Consumer Action Law Centre and the Financial Rights Legal Centre. The report was about the use of forced bankruptcy and documented how some creditors could misuse the system, resulting in some people losing their homes over what were originally very small debts. The report had a significant impact, leading to changes in debt buyers' practices and the development of an industry guideline by the banking industry.

Financial counsellors have been a vital support for so many Australians in a year defined by the devastation of the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to these events dominated the second half of the year. We continue to play a key role coordinating and supporting agencies delivering financial counselling services in bushfire affected areas, and the various projects underway responding to the pandemic are the largest we have ever undertaken. Together, these projects will increase the number of trained financial counsellors, provide flexible service delivery and raise the profile of financial counselling in Australia.

We also set up a new service from scratch — the Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Support Line. This is the first dedicated phone financial counselling service for small business in Australia. It is not, however, the Board's intention that we deliver financial counselling services in the longer term. Our involvement reflected the need for the service to be established as quickly as possible and we were well placed to do that. Broadly, financial counsellors are seeing more small business clients and need access to dedicated resources and training. This will be a priority for the 2020–21 financial year.

While we were disappointed our May 2020 conference in Darwin was unable to proceed because of the pandemic, we were still pleased to bring the sector together for the first ever virtual Jan Pentland Foundation dinner.

We remain concerned about the operation of some parts of the credit market. Payday lenders and consumer lease providers offer high cost products that trap too many people in debt. Buy Now, Pay Later lenders are also proliferating, and these debts are an increasing component of financial counsellors' casework.

In a joint Board/Council planning workshop in February 2020, we agreed on the importance of our work being undertaken in collaboration with the State and Territory financial counselling associations. One of the positive features of this past year has been the way we have all worked together for the benefit of the whole sector.

Looking forward, Australia will grapple with the deepest recession in nearly 100 years, and experience high levels of unemployment and disadvantage. From September 2020, the government and industry support that assisted thousands of Australians through the first part of the pandemic will begin to taper and the future remains deeply uncertain. Undoubtedly, many Australians will benefit from free and independent financial counselling and this will be a vital part of our country's economic recovery.

Our work would not be possible without the tireless work of our staff and we thank them for their continued commitment. The FCA office is in Melbourne and this meant staff endured a very long period of lockdown. The team had to quickly adapt to working from home and they have been both flexible and resilient in doing this. It is truly extraordinary that so much has been achieved under such challenging circumstances.

We also thank the members of the FCA Representative Council and the FCA Board for their guidance and support during what has been quite an extraordinary year. We are lucky to have such high calibre people prepared to provide their expertise to advance our vision of an Australia with fewer people in financial hardship.

About Us

Our purpose

Financial Counselling Australia is the national voice of the financial counselling profession in Australia. We provide resources and support to the financial counselling sector and advocate for people who are financially vulnerable.

We are a high impact, not-for-profit organisation. Our members include all State and Territory financial counselling associations, representing approximately 950 financial counsellors. We also provide support and resources to over 80 financial capability workers. Together financial counsellors and capability workers assist hundreds of thousands of Australians to overcome existing financial difficulties and minimise future problems.

Our members



Our vision and goals

We envision an Australia with fewer people in financial hardship. We work toward that by:



Increasing access to financial counselling

Demand for financial counselling significantly exceeds supply. Existing funding from the State and Federal governments is inadequate, ad hoc and uncertain.



Advocating for fairer treatment

Many of the issues affecting financial counsellors' clients are a result of unfair or exploitative marketplace practices, an inadequate social security safety net or lack of access to appropriate financial products.



Building and supporting the profession

A major role for FCA is to help financial counsellors do their jobs. We do this in consultation with the State and Territory financial counselling associations.



Raising the profession's profile

Financial counselling is a vital community service, but many in the wider community do not know it exists, including those experiencing financial hardship. Many key decision-makers in government and industry are also unaware of the role financial counsellors play and often misunderstand it.

Our Board and Representative Council

FCA is governed by a Board and a Representative Council. The Board has overall responsibility for FCA's financial management, legal compliance and strategic direction, while the Council considers issues that affect the members of the financial counselling profession, particularly those requiring a national approach.

The Board comprises four directors from the financial counselling sector and three external directors, appointed by the Board based on their skills, background and expertise. Financial counselling directors must be accredited financial counsellors and are elected by the Representative Council.

The Representative Council is comprised of 14 voting members and 3 non-voting members. The voting members are the Chair of the seven State/Territory financial counselling associations, plus one additional financial counsellor, from each association. The three non-voting members are FCA's Chair (who also chairs the Council), FCA's CEO and one other FCA Board member. A financial counsellor from the Northern Territory attends on an ex officio basis.

**Representative
Council voting
members at
June 30,
2020**

Northern Territory



Kelly Gulliver (ex officio)
Accredited financial counsellor

Financial Counsellors ACT



Lyndall Millburn
President



Deb Shroot
Accredited financial counsellor

Financial Counsellors Association of Queensland



Jan Perkins
President



Vicki Penner
Accredited financial counsellor

South Australian Financial Counselling Association



Carolyn Piper
Chair



Astra Fleetwood
Accredited financial counsellor

Financial Counsellors Association of WA

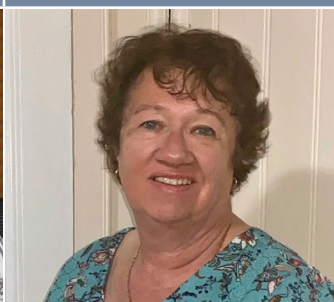


Wendy Black
President



Clarissa Harp
Accredited financial counsellor

Financial Counsellors Association of NSW



Pauline Smith
President



Geoff Cornwall
Accredited financial counsellor

Financial Counsellors Association of Tasmania



Fiona Moore
Chair



Danielle Slade
Accredited financial counsellor

Financial Counselling Victoria



Colin Harte
President



David Balcombe
Accredited financial counsellor

FCA Board at June 30, 2020



Our staff at June 30, 2020

Maura Angle	Director Community Engagement
Julie Barrow	Coordinator Financial Counselling Development
Rita Battaglin	General Manager Projects
Lynda Edwards	Coordinator Financial Capability
Peter Gartlan	Coordinator Bushfire Response
Mel Gibson	Chief Technical Officer
Paul Gillett	Director Quality and Innovation
Fiona Guthrie	Chief Executive Officer
Vanessa Hood	Director Research and Evaluation
Tamara How	Office Coordinator
Jill Keating	Finance Manager
Georgia Lenton-Williams	Communications Advisor
Lauren Levin	Director Policy and Campaigns
Domenique Meyrick	Director of Development
Jenny Peachey	Strategic Project Advisor
Charlotte Wirtz	Administration and Research Support

We also thank Kat Lane, Clarissa Gamble, Liz Minter and Karyn Schluter-White for their assistance through the year.

A Decade of Progress

Significant change has taken place since FCA's funding was renewed by the Federal Government in 2009 and we are proud of what has been achieved. Some of the decade's highlights are described below.



2009 Increased funding from the Federal Government

The Commonwealth Financial Counselling Program, as it was then called, began in 1990 with funding of \$2.5 million per annum. Since then there have been significant increases. This has enabled financial counsellors to support Australians in financial hardship, both through periods of relative stability and times of national crisis.

2009 Jan Pentland Foundation

Jan Pentland was a much-loved chair of FCA. She was a champion for financial counselling whose work had a significant and lasting impact on the profession. In 2009, the Jan Pentland Foundation was established in Jan's memory to provide scholarships for aspiring financial counsellors. The scholarship winners are announced each year at the Jan Pentland Foundation dinner, coinciding with the annual FCA conference.

In 2017, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia provided \$500,000 in funding for the Foundation's work. This will provide for ten scholarships per year for the next ten years.

2011 National Debt Helpline

The National Debt Helpline (NDH) is a phone financial counselling service and the gateway to financial counselling for many people. It is now well established and receives up to 180,000 calls each year.

Before 2011, there were phone services in some States but they operated independently of each other. These services were nationalised in 2011 when the NDH was established, making it easier for those in need to find a financial counsellor. FCA coordinates the organisations delivering the NDH and manages the website.

2012 ATM fees

Our 2010 report, *'ATM Fees in Indigenous Communities'* documented the at times large percentages of people's income being spent on ATM fees in remote communities by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In many communities, the only ATMs available are privately owned and charge a fee for use, a fact of life not faced by Australians in most other areas.

In 2012, we travelled with representatives of the Reserve Bank of Australia, Treasury, and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission to several remote communities to show them the impact of high ATM fees first hand. The banking industry also listened and now provides subsidies to make 85 private ATMs fee-free across several communities. We continue to advocate for more ATMs to be included in the initiative.

2012 Toolkit website

We developed a digital toolkit that every financial counsellor in Australia can access. The toolkit is a one-stop-shop that contains all the information financial counsellors need to do their jobs, as well as a learning management system. Creditors can also access the information they need to verify they are dealing with a bona fide financial counsellor.

2012 Code of Ethical Practice and 2015 National Membership Standards

In consultation with the State and Territory financial counselling associations, we established a framework for the profession's operation. The Australian Financial Counselling Code of Ethical Practice was introduced in 2012; a code which underpins the entire profession's operation (which will be reviewed in 2021). The National Standards for Membership and Accreditation (2015) established a consistent approach to membership, including introducing a national points system for continuing professional development. The standards and codes are available on our website.

2017 Financial Counselling Foundation

We established the Financial Counselling Foundation as a mechanism for industry and the public to contribute to financial counselling that managed potential conflicts of interest. The Foundation is a charitable trust and directly funds financial counselling casework and capacity building in the sector.

Initially established with a \$250,000 grant from ANZ Bank in 2017, the Foundation has since attracted over \$13 million in funding. To date, the Foundation has distributed about \$10 million of those funds, breathing life into a significant number of projects that would not otherwise have been realised. A list of funded projects can be found on the Foundation's website: www.financialcounsellingfoundation.org.

2018 A Day in the Life

Since 2018, we have invited federal politicians and senior government and industry decision-makers to spend time with a financial counsellor to better understand their work and the issues people experiencing financial hardship face. The program has run across the country, with 122 politicians and industry leaders taking part to date.



◀ Senator for Western Australia Patrick Dodson (left) at Broome Circle for 'Day in the Life' in August 2018



◀ Hon. Andrew Gee MP, Member for Calare, NSW (middle) at Lifeline Central West NSW for 'Day in the Life' in September 2019

2019 Way Forward Debt Solutions

Piloted in 2019, Way Forward is a charity that helps individuals pay down debt by negotiating affordable repayment arrangements with creditors. The consumer makes one payment to Way Forward that it distributes to creditors on a pro rata basis. The service is free for consumers.

We advocated for the establishment of Way Forward as a service to provide more options for people in hardship, that would operate in a fair and ethical way. To date, Way Forward has assisted 250 people. For more information see: www.wayforward.org.au

2020 Small Business Helpline

Following the 2019 – 2020 bushfires, we received funding to build a financial counselling helpline for affected small businesses. Financial counsellors are increasingly seeing more small business clients and a phone service makes it easy to find assistance. We established the helpline in just eight weeks, setting up the telephone system, database and website, and training counsellors. With the advent of COVID-19, the service had to also quickly adapt to remote delivery.

FCA took this project on because of our capacity to establish it urgently. Should the current two-year funding be extended, it is not the Board's intention for FCA to stay involved.

2020 Gambling Law Reform

Our advocacy work contributed to improved consumer protection in the online gambling space. Federal legislation to establish the National Online Gambling Self Exclusion Register was passed with bipartisan support on the last parliamentary sitting day of 2019. The momentum for this started with our *Duds Mugs and the A-list* report in 2015.

We continue to encourage the banking industry to introduce tools that will better protect customers who gamble. The ABA initiated a consultation on the use of credit cards for gambling. A number of banks have stopped credit cards for gambling. NAB, Westpac and CommBank now have user-initiated gambling blocks.

Year in Review

The first half of the year

The key event in the first half of 2019 – 2020 was the October 2019 release of the independent review of financial counselling, conducted by Louise Sylvan AM. *The Countervailing Power: Review of the Coordination and Funding for Financial Counselling Services across Australia*, was commissioned by the Federal Government following Commissioner Hayne's observation of the need for predictable and stable funding for financial counselling in the final report of the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry.

Inadequate, ad hoc and uncertain funding has been a hallmark of the financial counselling sector and a topic we have flagged in each of our annual reports. The Sylvan Review's recommendations present a breakthrough opportunity, with a key recommendation being that the various industries that benefit when their customers access financial counselling also contribute to funding the sector. As the sector's peak body, we have played a significant role advocating for the implementation of the review's recommendations.

Our 'Day in the Life' project which links federal politicians and decision-makers in government and industry with local financial counselling agencies continued to operate successfully, but was paused in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The program aims to increase understanding of financial counsellors' work and the challenges facing people experiencing financial hardship.

In August 2019 we released *Who is Making Australians Bankrupt?*, a joint report with the Financial Rights Legal Centre and Consumer Action Law Centre. The report documented the extent to which banks, debt collectors, finance companies and others were using forced bankruptcy as a debt collection tool, with some people at risk of losing their homes for debts as low as \$5,000. The report was the genesis for an ABC 7.30 report which led to changes in company practices as well as the release of a guideline about the sale of debt by the banking industry.

This year, we received direct funding from two banks for our work. Funding from CommBank is being used to develop and deliver further training on family violence—including working with men who perpetrate family violence—and training about elder abuse. Funding from Westpac is being used to fund financial counselling agencies in bushfire-affected areas, where there are gaps in support.

The second half of the year

The second half of 2019–2020 was a time of intense activity dominated by the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both FCA and the financial counselling sector received increased government funding, enabling us to increase capacity.

Our role responding to the bushfires was to coordinate and support the agencies that received additional funding in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland. This included providing training—about insurance issues, for example—collecting specific data for government about what was happening on the ground, and liaising with the banking and insurance industries.

We also set up the Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Support Line (www.smallbusinessbushfire.org.au). This service is funded to employ ten specialist small business financial counsellors.

The pandemic continues to cast a dark shadow over all Australians. The first few weeks of the pandemic were intense as financial counselling agencies, and FCA, moved to working from home. For most agencies, this meant a new model of service delivery using tele-financial counselling. Simultaneously, the various policies implemented by government, regulators and industry had dramatic impacts on the economy. The Federal Government introduced JobKeeper to provide income support to people whose jobs were at risk, doubled the rate of JobSeeker (previously named Newstart) and allowed people early access to a portion of their superannuation. Banks deferred loans, utility providers stopped disconnections and tenants were given protection from evictions.

All these initiatives placed a cushion under the economy. For people who had been living on unemployment benefits that were significantly below the poverty line, the increase in the JobSeeker payment was a particularly welcome boost. Overall, the support measures meant that for the first time, demand for financial counselling services was lower than normal. Calls to the National Debt Helpline for example, dropped between 20% – 30% (differing between States), in the last four months of 2019–2020 compared to the same time the previous year. People who did seek financial counselling, however, were from a new cohort, with many having never previously sought services like ours. Many people are highly stressed and worried about the future.

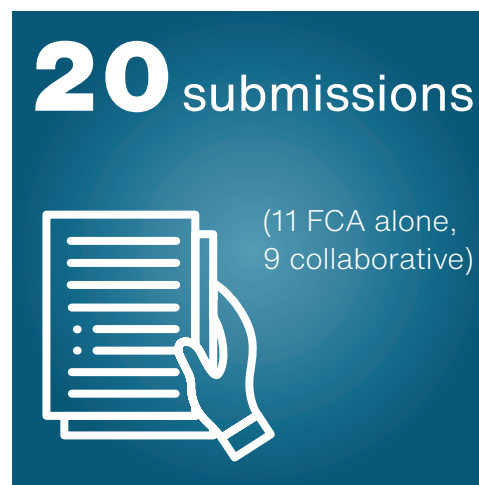
As the National Debt Helpline (NDH) is the gateway to the financial counselling sector for many people, we invested time and resources in a revamped home page, substantial new COVID-19 related content and began a pilot of live chat on the website. We also invested in the promotion of financial counseling as well as the NDH, with the NDH having a growing social media presence.

Our 2020 conference was planned for Darwin in May but had to be cancelled because of the pandemic. This was disappointing given the amount of work put into its planning, but there was of course no choice.

We also continued to support financial capability workers, sharing information and providing training.

All in all, the financial counselling sector and FCA finished the year in a stronger place. FCA itself is a bigger organisation and is working on several fronts to improve the financial counselling sector's capacity to deliver its services.

2019 – 2020 at a glance



Significant initiatives

- Establishing the Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Helpline
- Bushfire coordination
- Special resources responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including www.covid19fc.org.au and various guides
- Intern project
- National Debt Helpline new home page and promotion
- DocuSign pilot
- Training for financial counsellors—tele-financial counselling, Beyond Blue webinars
- New financial counsellor authorisation form

Sylvan Review

On 3 October 2019, the Hon. Anne Ruston, the Minister for Social Services, released the independent review of financial counselling services conducted by Louise Sylvan AM: *'The Countervailing Power: Review of the Coordination and Funding for Financial Counselling'* (see timeline below).

The Government commissioned the review in response to comments made by Commissioner Hayne in the final report of the Financial Services Royal Commission about the need for predictable and stable funding for financial counselling and community legal services.

The key recommendations of the review were that industry should contribute to the funding of financial counselling through a levy and that funding be managed through an independent body. The independent body would oversee a national strategy, leading to a more coordinated approach to service delivery. The body would be a tangible demonstration of a community, government and business partnership.

The report is a huge vote of confidence in the financial counselling sector. It's recommendations, if implemented in the spirit intended, will transform financial counselling, and significantly increase the number of people who will be able to access free financial counselling.

It is important for the model's success that industry involvement is as wide as possible, including—at a minimum—financial services providers, insurers, electricity companies and the telecommunications sector. These are the industries that drive demand for financial counselling and benefit when their customers get back on track.

Public release of Final Report Financial Services Royal Commission		Government announces Louise Sylvan AM to lead review		Election	
4 February 2019	4 February 2019	24 February 2019	End March 2019	May 2019	3 October 2019
	Government response to RC—agree there is a need for predictable and stable funding—says it will conduct review		Sylvan completes review		Minister for Social Services Anne Ruston releases review

All this good work also depends on the State and Federal governments continuing to play their part by maintaining funding (or for some States to increase contributions to adequate levels). Accordingly, the review recommends a more formal relationship between governments such as a National Partnership Agreement.

At the date of this report's release, the Federal Government has yet to release its formal response to the Sylvan Review. To enable the sector to build with confidence to support more people in a time of acute financial pressure for so many, we look forward to that response as soon as possible.



“The desirability of predictable and stable funding for the legal assistance sector and financial counselling services is clear and how this may best be delivered is worthy of careful consideration.”

▲ Commissioner Kenneth Hayne

“The asymmetry of knowledge and power between consumers and financial services entities has been evident throughout the Commission’s work. Financial products and services have grown ever more complicated, numerous, and difficult to distinguish ...

The legal assistance sector and financial counselling services perform very valuable work. Their services like financial services, are a necessity to the community. They add strength to customers who are otherwise disadvantaged in disputes with financial service entities ...

I offer no views about the most appropriate sources, level or mix of funding. However, the desirability of predictable and stable funding for the legal assistance sector and financial counselling services is clear and how this may best be delivered is worthy of careful consideration (emphasis added). Such consideration should look at all options that may be available to supplement existing funding.”¹

Commissioner Kenneth Hayne

1

Final Report, Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry, Volume 1, p 490 – 93.

Responding to the Bushfires

Coordination of the Sector's Response

The Federal Government funded several financial counselling agencies as well as the National Debt Helpline to assist people experiencing financial hardship following the bushfires. FCA's role was to coordinate the service delivery response, including training, information sharing and data collection. We have provided fortnightly data reports to government on promotion, number of clients, and main casework issues.

Funding of \$500,000 from Westpac was used to strategically fill funding gaps in locations where there was insufficient government support.

To 30 June 2020, federally funded financial counselling agencies had provided 2,288 sessions for people in bushfire-affected areas. The main casework issues have been access to grants, insurance claims issues, under insurance and no insurance, rebuilding difficulties and mental health concerns. Financial counsellors have also engaged with local communities – visiting homes, working from recovery centres, speaking at community meetings and promoting their services through community facebook pages.

In May 2020, the Government allocated an additional \$3.5m funding for 12 months, to 22 organisations across the five affected states and one territory.

Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Support Line

On 20 January 2020 the Federal Government announced a suite of measures to support small businesses affected by the bushfires. These included \$3.5 million to establish the Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Support Line which was launched with an accompanying website on 18 March 2020.

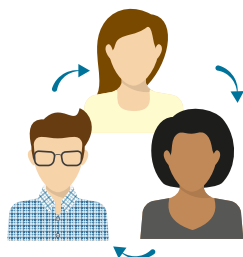
From inception to 30 June 2020, the support line helped 176 unique businesses in 187 instances across a broad range of industries. The most common form of assistance was access to grants and assistance with debt management, together with emotional support. In our experience, many people are overwhelmed by the situation they find themselves in and this support has been critical to their wellbeing.

Most small businesses seeking assistance are very small. 87 per cent have five or fewer employees and 44 per cent have no employees. Most callers (53 per cent) were from New South Wales and a further 23 per cent were from Victoria. Most callers had not suffered the direct impact of flame and smoke damage but had experienced a significant loss of trade. For example, road closures preventing access to markets or reduced tourist numbers. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a cumulative impact on callers who have now had to deal with a double catastrophe.

The support line is producing six-monthly 'insight reports' with a snapshot of relevant data and case studies. These will be available on the service's website in the future.

Responding to COVID-19

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Government announced additional funding for the financial counselling sector. This included additional funding for FCA and we quickly moved to put several projects in place to increase the sector's capacity to meet demand and improve service delivery. A summary of these projects is below.



Coordination and Support

We developed numerous resources for the sector to help it respond to the pandemic, including key information about working from home.

Financial counselling services needed to adapt and we produced a specific resource and eventually a whole new website that mapped out what needed to change in financial counselling practice, what stayed the same and other critical information. The website is updated with the latest information about government and industry support packages; it is a vital resource. Since its launch in April, the site had been visited nearly 2,000 times by June 30, 2020.

We also offered training to the sector about delivering services by phone, assisting small business and, in partnership with Beyond Blue, wellbeing webinars to care for the mental health of our own workforce.



Making it easier to find a financial counsellor

People can only benefit from financial counselling if they know about it and can find a service.

A big effort was put into updating the National Debt Helpline (NDH) website (www.ndh.org.au) with a new home page and a number of new pages in response to the pandemic (COVID Financial Survival Guide; utilities/telcos/rates; bankruptcy; early access to super; making repayment arrangements: emergency financial assistance; home loans, and rent.)

This project promotes the NDH as a clear point of entry to financial counselling and advances financial counselling more generally. There have been several media articles, radio interviews and the NDH now has a social media presence.



Technology

We are piloting live chat on the National Debt Helpline (NDH) to increase access, particularly for young people. Also on a pilot basis, we are working with interested financial counselling agencies to improve referral pathways by establishing a system to increase visibility between the NDH and those agencies about appointment availability.



More financial counsellors: A simulated placement model

The Diploma of Financial Counselling requires students to complete 220 hours of placement in an agency. This was proving difficult to arrange before the pandemic and became even more challenging during it. Many students were simply unable to complete their study because they couldn't find a placement. This project involves developing a simulated learning environment to allow placements to be completed online under the guidance of expert financial counsellors.



More financial counsellors: interns

With additional funding, one of the challenges is to train new financial counsellors to fill the additional positions. The intern project provides financial counselling agencies that employ trainee financial counsellors with one-off funding and support to cover the additional costs of mentoring this group as they study and learn on the job.

Goals and Impact

Our goals are to:

- Build and support the profession;
- Advocate for fair treatment of people in the financial services marketplace;
- Raise the profile of financial counselling; and
- Increase access to financial counselling.

Building and supporting the profession

Review of the Diploma of Financial Counselling

Over six months, we extensively consulted to feed into the 'case for change' for the scheduled Diploma of Financial Counselling review. Consultation included:

- Interviews with financial counsellors who had graduated within the past two years
- A survey of recent students (both graduates and people who did not complete the Diploma)
- Interviews with selected financial counselling agency managers
- A workshop with stakeholders from the rural financial counselling sector including agency managers, experienced and new rural financial counsellors, and funders
- A workshop with key members of the generalist financial counselling sector, including agency managers, experienced and new financial counsellors, and RTOs
- Interviews with representative RTOs offering the Diploma
- Interviews with training managers from the state financial counselling associations
- Discussion with the FCA Representative Council.

We have not been able to progress the case for change due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other priorities. One of the recommendations is for the inclusion of a specialist small business unit. We hope that the case for change is something we can return to in the coming financial year.

DocuSign

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many financial counsellors started working from home, restricting in-person client interactions. This made it difficult to obtain written signatures on the standard third party authorisation form. We partnered with DocuSign to build a process to obtain the authority digitally. The service is free for the first 12 months and we are grateful to DocuSign for their support.

Facebook toolkit group

To help financial counsellors receive information directly, we established a closed Facebook group to provide updates about sector developments. The group had 665 members at 30 June 2020.

More financial counsellors

As described earlier, one of the issues facing the profession is a pipeline of new financial counsellors. The intern project and the simulated placement project are both designed to address this.

The intern project provides funding to financial counselling agencies to employ students to learn on the job, while studying. The simulated placement project is a virtual financial counselling agency that allows students to complete their 220 hours of placement in an online setting, under the guidance of experienced financial counsellors.

Special COVID-19 resources

Responding to the disruption to the sector COVID-19 caused in early 2020, we developed several guides for financial counsellors to help them incorporate changes to their work necessitated by the pandemic. The aim has been to strengthen the sector to better meet immediate and future demand. These guides include detail about changes to government programs; debt collection and enforcement action; rental and mortgage protections; payday lending and utilities; and advice about various support networks, among other things. We continue to update these resources as the year evolves.

We also developed a comprehensive online toolkit for financial counsellors to provide critical information about the fast-evolving landscape in 2020 (covid19fc.org.au). Launched in April 2020, the site had been visited nearly 2,000 times by 30 June 2020.

Small business training

Once the small business help line was established in March 2020, we began training the whole sector to more effectively assist small business clients. Work has also begun putting together a 'small business handbook' which will be a one-stop-shop resource for financial counsellors to assist small businesses.

Conference preparation

Scheduled for May 2020, this year's conference was ultimately unable to proceed, but a lot of work went into its development. Over 700 people were scheduled to attend across five days and 30 events. We hope we can bring people together again for 2021's conference.

Partnership with Beyond Blue

In June 2020, we ran wellbeing seminars for financial counsellors around Australia in partnership with Beyond Blue. In the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was critical to ensure the sector had access to appropriate support as people worked through a challenging and stressful time. The webinars were very well attended, with 310 financial counsellors attending across five events.

Advocating for fair treatment

Advocacy for gambling consumer protection

Our advocacy for consumer protection for those impacted by gambling is in its fifth year. We had input into the legislation to establish the National Online Gambling Self Exclusion Register, that was passed by the Federal Parliament in December 2019. The legislation provides for significant criminal and civil penalties for operators. We have run training sessions for financial counsellors to understand the new consumer protection framework and what it means for their casework.

We met with regulators including Austrac and state gambling regulators. We supported financial counsellors in lodging complaints with regulators, and highlighted successful outcomes in the media with the aim of holding the industry accountable.

We continued working with financial institutions to understand how and why they should support their customers impacted by gambling. NAB, Westpac and Commonwealth Bank now allow their customers to set gambling blocks on their cards and accounts. Latitude, Macquarie and a number of other banks no longer allow their credit cards to be used for gambling.

We made a submission to the Australian Banking Association responding to its discussion paper about the use of credit cards for gambling.

Finally, we continue to generate media to highlight inadequacies in gambling consumer protection.

Bushfires and Advocacy

Based on our experiences with the Small Business Bushfire Financial Counselling Support Line, we made a submission to The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. We noted the valuable role that government grants can play in helping small businesses recover, but also how challenging the system can be for businesses to navigate. There are inconsistencies across jurisdictions and information can be hard to find, confusing and complex.

Senate inquiry into payday lending legislation

We made a submission to, and appeared before, the Senate Economics Legislation committee inquiry into a bill to amend the regulatory framework applying to small amount credit contracts (payday loans) and consumer leases. The bill replicated, word for word, the Federal Government's exposure draft legislation released in October 2017 which was never finalised. Our submission and appearance reinforced the harm caused by these products.

Raising the profile

A Day in the Life

We invited federal politicians and senior decision makers in government and industry to spend time with a financial counsellor to better understand their work and the issues people experiencing financial hardship face. This year, 20 leaders participated in the program, though it has been on hold for most of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to restarting this impactful program when circumstances allow.

Media and communications

We now have a dedicated communications team which manages communications and engagement for both FCA and the National Debt Helpline (NDH). The aim is to encourage people experiencing financial stress to seek help early and to contact a financial counsellor.

From a starting point of zero in April 2020, at 30 June 2020 the NDH had:

- 233 Facebook followers;
- 68 Twitter followers and 60,100 tweet impressions; and
- 98 LinkedIn followers.

FCA had

- 893 Facebook followers; and
- 1182 Twitter followers.

The communications team has used Google Adwords to drive website traffic. The most popular page has been 'early access to superannuation'. Following the Federal Government's decision to enable early access to superannuation, advice from financial counsellors has been to explore all options, not just early access to super, so it was pleasing to see the information on this page being accessed.

This year we had significant active and reactive mainstream media engagement, as well as Facebook and Spotify advertising, posters in Coles supermarkets, and flyers sent to MPs and charities around the country.

Importantly, information about the NDH is now included on most government and court websites. Work continues to include this on other relevant websites or in physical settings such as doctor's surgeries and in media outlets.

Our communications team has also provided media training to financial counsellors across the country so they can provide a "frontline" account of the issues facing the public.

Increasing access to financial counselling

More access for those affected by bushfires

Following the devastation of the bushfires over the summer of 2019 – 2020, the Federal Government, through the Department of Social Services (DSS), provided additional funding to a number of financial counselling agencies in the affected areas. Our role is to coordinate these efforts.

Up to 30 June 2020, DSS funded agencies engaged in 2,288 financial counselling sessions with bushfire survivors. Casework issues included insurance, grants and mental health.

Live Chat

We piloted live chat on the National Debt Helpline website to reach new audiences, including younger people, and as part of supporting the helpline's adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support for the Jan Pentland Foundation

We continued to provide support to the Jan Pentland Foundation. This included managing the Jan Pentland Foundation dinner and the administration of the Jan Pentland Foundation scholarships.

The Jan Pentland Foundation was established in 2009 and honours a former long-standing Chair of FCA, Jan Pentland. Jan was a much-loved financial counsellor and was the driving force behind FCA's renewed funding.

Jan Pentland Dinner

Given the postponement of the 2020 FCA Conference, we instead organised the first ever virtual Jan Pentland Foundation dinner. This was a big amount of work for what was a relatively short event, but it was important for our sector to come together and acknowledge this year's scholarship winners and the Jan Pentland Prize winner.

Financial counsellors from around Australia joined the dinner, with many dressing for the occasion, often in purple, which was Jan's favourite colour. There were over 280 attendees. The evening included entertainment from FCA's Paul Gillett, a 'Who Am I' quiz curated by talented impersonator Ben Price (which is why you can see a photo of Prince Charles on the next page) and finished with Bollywood dancing.

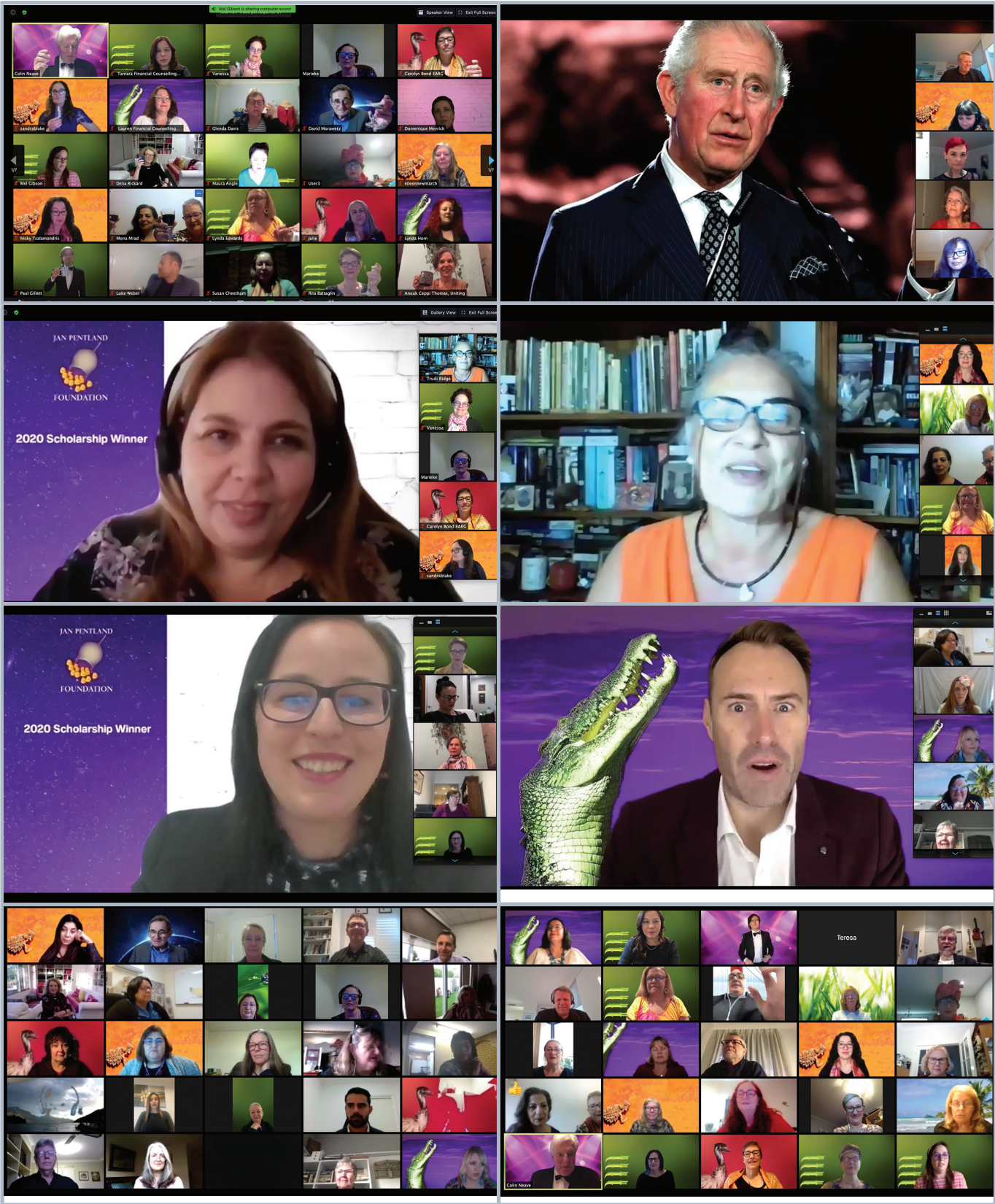
Jan Pentland Prize

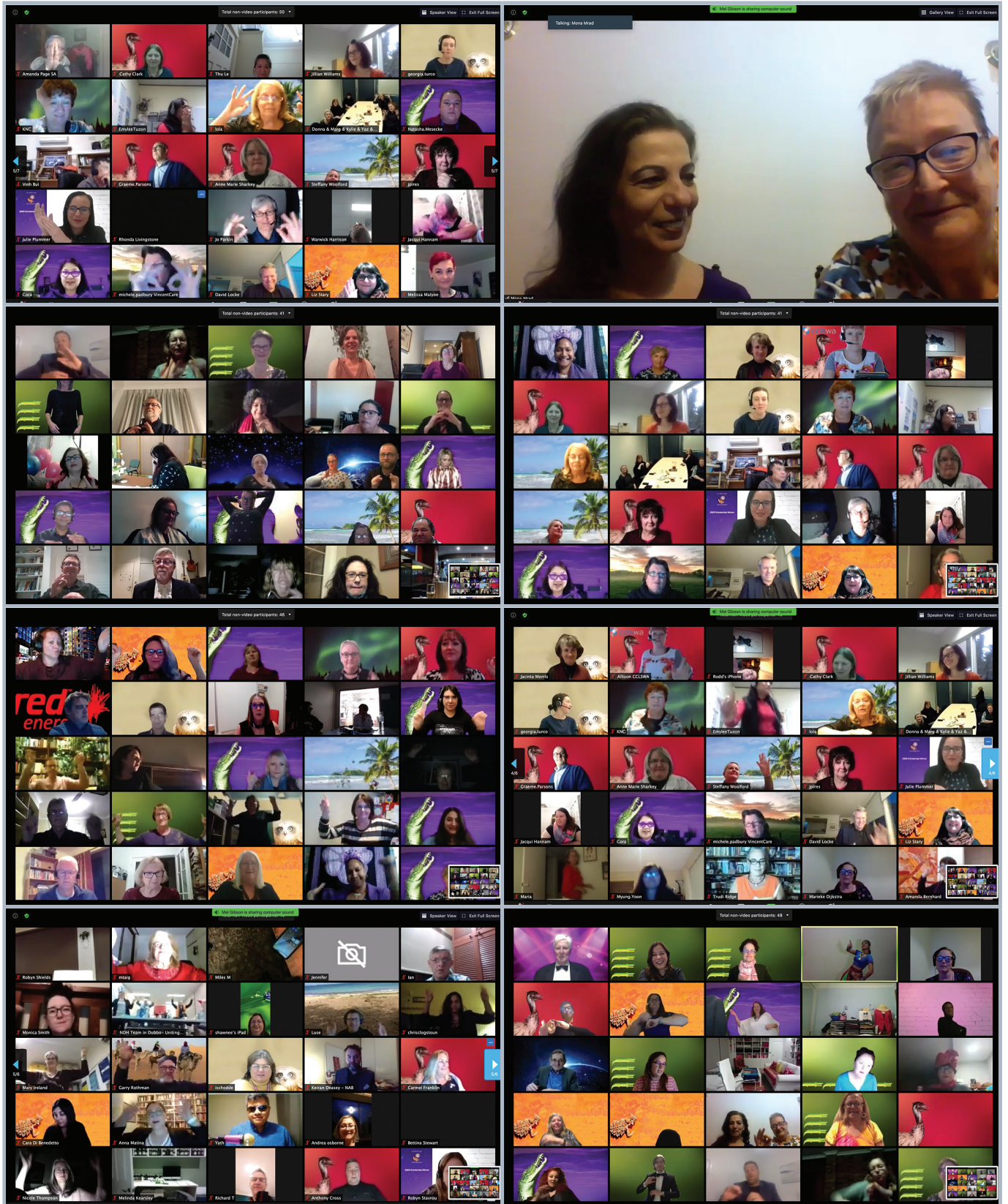
The winner of the Jan Pentland Prize for 2020 was Mona Mrad from Uniting Kildonan. The judges of the prize wrote the following about Mona:

Mona has been a financial counsellor for nearly 20 years. She has been a team leader, financial inclusion at Uniting Victoria Tasmania (Kildonan) for 15 of those years. She is a strong and inspiring advocate and role model for her community, her colleagues and her agency.

Mona has played a key role in the development and delivery of many innovative programs. She was the first financial counsellor at the Royal Children's Hospital and four other hospitals as a pilot program that progressed for many years. She was a first responder in the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires at Kinglake working with other community groups. She has championed change in the way many companies deal with hardship programs, including at Yarra Water. She is also well known for her untiring promotion of advocacy and information to many CALD and Aboriginal communities and her commitment to sponsoring, supervising and mentoring students, staff and external financial counsellors.

Jan Pentland Dinner via Zoom





Financial statements

Our audited financial statements are available on FCA's website.