



# ANNUAL REPORT 2013 – 2014

FCA: THE NATIONAL VOICE FOR FINANCIAL COUNSELLING



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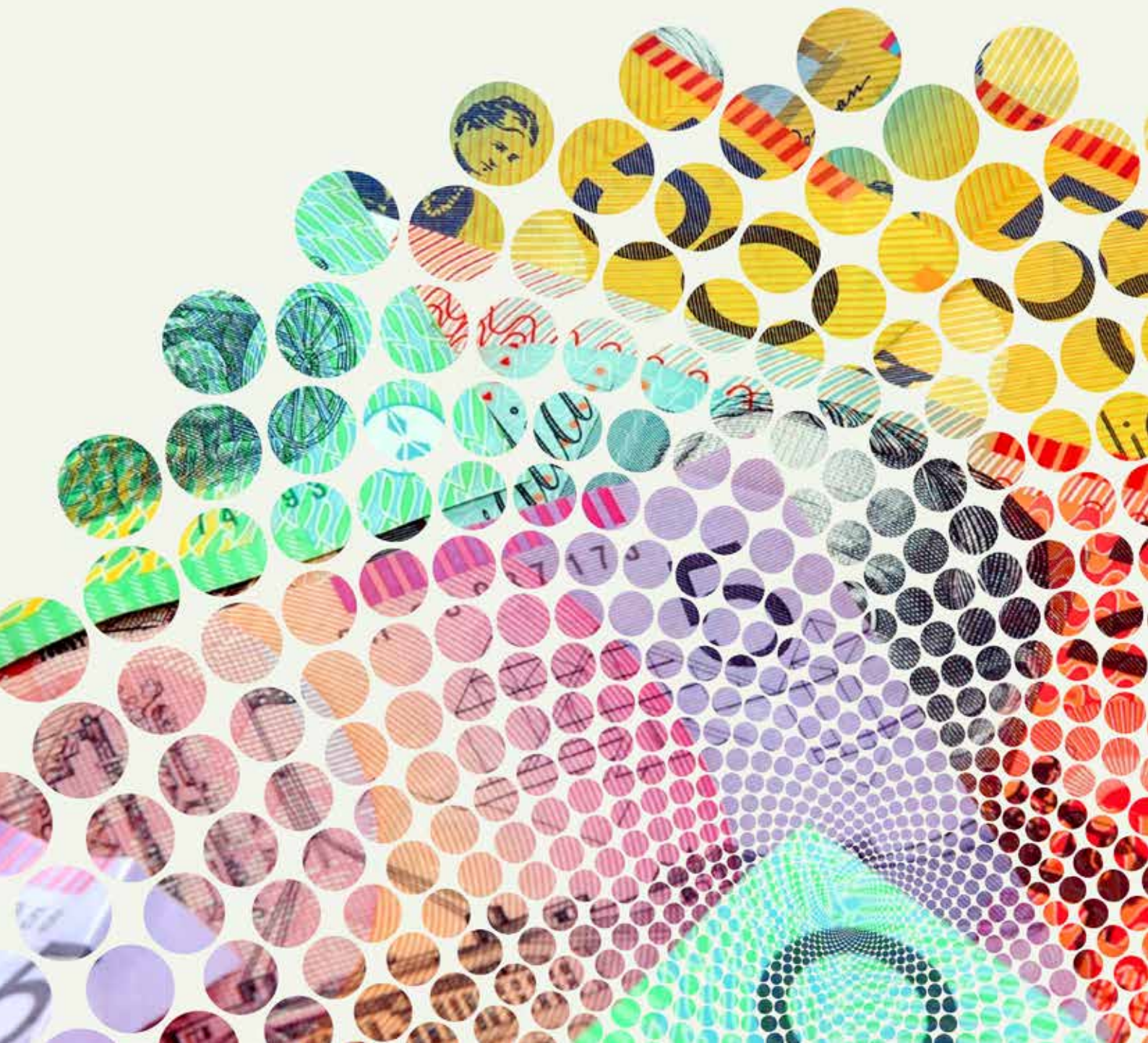


# BOARD MEMBERS AND STAFF 2013–14

Financial Counselling Australia is the peak body for financial counsellors in Australia.

FCA's members are each State and Territory financial counselling association.

Each association elects one person as their representative on the FCA Board.





## THE FCA BOARD

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**Carmel Franklin**  
(Chair)  
Australian Capital  
Territory



**Kay Dilger**  
(Deputy Chair)  
Victoria



**Phil Powell**  
(Treasurer)  
Tasmania



**Judy Egan**  
(Secretary)  
(from November 2013)  
Northern Territory



**Marise Resuggan**  
Western Australia



**Jodie Logovik**  
(from March 2014)  
Queensland



**Rosalyn Williams**  
South Australia



**Graham Smith**  
(from February 2014)  
New South Wales

### Previous Board Members during this financial year

**Fiona Hawkins** (Qld)  
until March 2014

**Lyn Brailey** (NSW)  
until September 2013

**Bernadette Redford**  
(NSW)  
October 2013 until January  
2014

**Kate Rich** (NT)  
until September 2013

**Cherith Pryer** (SA)  
until August 2013

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## FCA STAFF



**Fiona Guthrie**  
Executive Director



**Lauren Levin**  
Manager Policy and  
Strategic Projects



**Prue Woods**  
Administrator



Just one word sums up the dominant issue of 2013-14—funding. As the year unfolded, it was increasingly uncertain whether the Federal Government would continue the \$20 million Commonwealth Financial Counselling Program, which began in 1990. Much of FCA's work inevitably focused on arguing for the continuation of this investment. Our message was positive, highlighting the many benefits of financial counselling in helping Australians overcome financial difficulty. As financial counsellors know only too well, financial difficulty impacts on many aspects of a person's life, often affecting relationships and mental and physical health or leading to loss of housing or disconnection of essential services. The effect on individuals and the broader community is often significant.

On budget night 2014, we were very relieved when the Federal Government, albeit with some minor reductions, continued the funding. Agencies will be required to tender for services into the future, but this outcome means that Australians in financial difficulty will still be able to receive independent advice from financial counsellors.

In adversity there are also opportunities, and the funding uncertainty gave us a platform in the media to raise the profile of financial counselling. Many politicians, from all parties, provided messages of support or took up our case directly. We thank them for their support as well as our colleagues from the industries with which we work: banking, insurance, utilities, telecommunications and debt collection. Thanks also to FCA staff—Fiona Guthrie, Lauren Levin and Prue Woods—for working tirelessly to support the sector and the clients we assist.

At the State level, the South Australian Government provided a modest amount of funding to the South Australian Financial Counsellors Association. This allows SAFCA to provide training and support to financial counsellors in that State. Queensland and the Northern Territory remain the only jurisdictions that do not fund a dedicated, generalist financial counselling program. This may be one reason Queensland has the highest level of insolvency per capita in Australia.

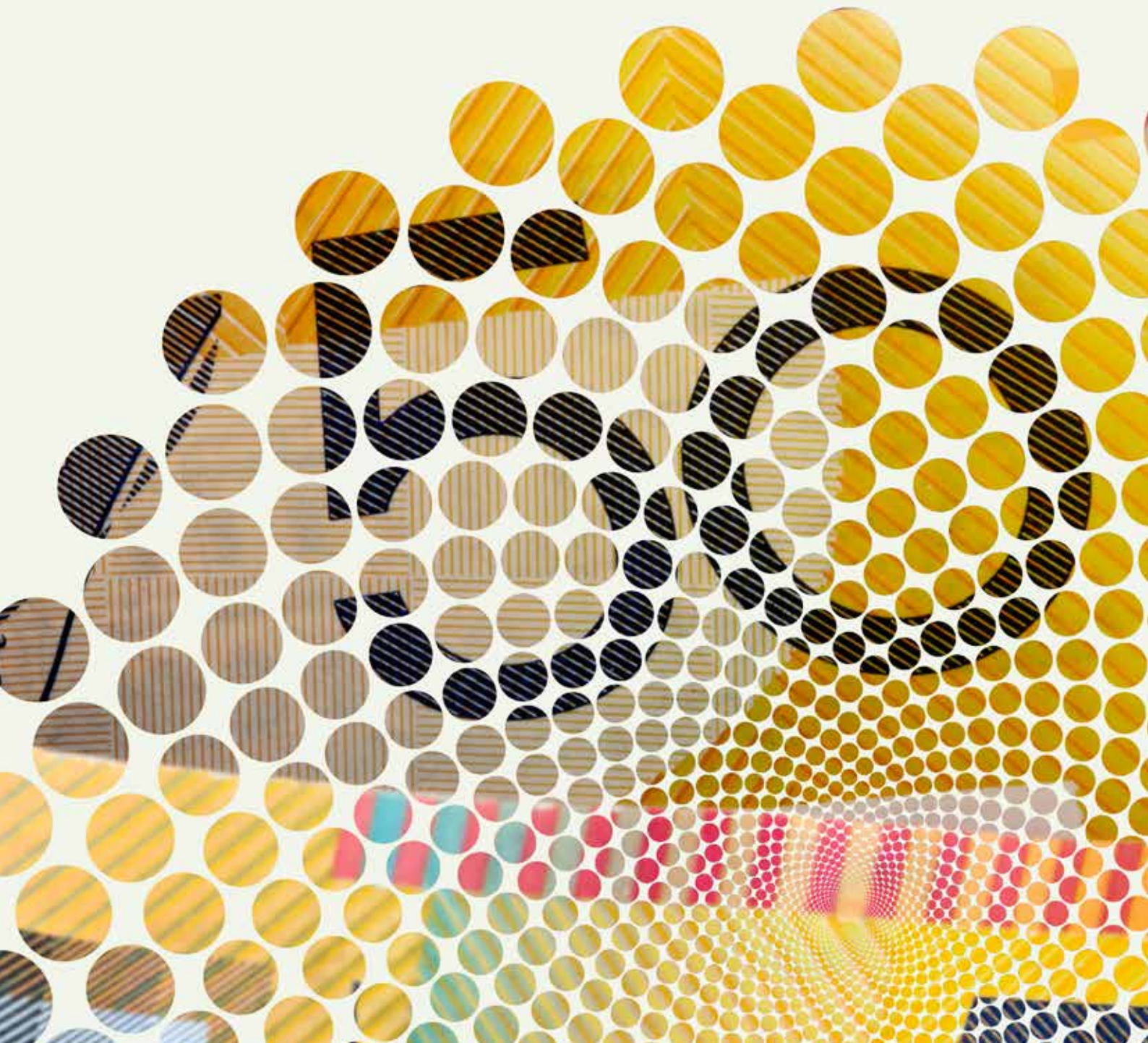
FCA continued to build and support the financial counselling profession, increase access to financial counselling and advocate for the fair treatment of financial consumers. Of significance was progress on national standards for membership and accreditation, the initial roll out of a National Registration Number system for all financial counsellors, changing industry practices for customers with unrecoverable debt and the incorporation of the Debt Repayment Service. A record numbers of clients were assisted, mainly through the growth in the national telephone financial counselling helpline.

Finally, many of us have noted that in the United Kingdom, debt advice and financial literacy initiatives are funded by a levy on the financial services industry. This is something that could be explored in Australia. Separately, a new project for FCA in 2015 will be to set up a charitable trust that could accept voluntary industry donations for financial counselling. This is another option.



# OUR ROLE

This section describes the various roles FCA undertakes from supporting the sector to delivering services.



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We coordinate the national financial counselling profession, working to lift standards and increase professionalism.

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- Developing common policies for the financial counselling profession  
*Example:* National standards for professional development and supervision, developing a uniform complaint handling policy.
- Developing resources for the profession  
*Example:* Online training module on credit reporting, password-protected toolkit website with tools and resources to help financial counsellors to do their jobs more effectively

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We act as a communications hub, disseminating information to financial counsellors across Australia and between industry, government and our sector.

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- Sending out regular updates and newsletters for financial counsellors.
- Making sure that important government and industry messages are disseminated rapidly and efficiently.  
*Example:* Information about industry assistance available after natural disasters
- Providing a two-way conduit for the sharing of information and ideas between the banking, utilities, debt collection and telecommunications sectors.  
*Example:* Input to the banking industry's guideline on financial hardship
- Working constructively with all industries to improve practices in relation to financial hardship and more generally.  
*Example:* Pilot of the National Hardship Register with the debt collection industry

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We deliver services

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- Coordinating the national financial counselling helpline (1800 007 007)  
*Example:* Analysis of call trends, information sharing, quality framework
- Managing the debtselfhelp.org.au website. This site that acts as a one-stop shop for people in financial difficulty and is a gateway to financial counselling.  
*Example:* Keeping more than 50 fact sheets up to date.

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We support eight state and territory financial counselling associations

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- Assisting with administrative support, assistance with State/Territory conference organisation, policy development, funding submissions and training opportunities.  
*Example:* Assistance provided to the South Australian association in writing a funding submission.  
*Example:* Training opportunities at the FCA Annual Conference

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We raise the profile of financial counselling and promote financial literacy

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- Providing informed comment in the media on issues relating to consumers in financial difficulty.
- Reinforcing consumer financial literacy messages through our work in the media, as well as with the consumer website [debtsselfhelp.org.au](http://debtsselfhelp.org.au) which we manage.
- Speaking at conferences and other events to explain financial counselling and expand access.

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We contribute to policy development

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- Government agencies including the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC), the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), the Australian Financial Security Authority and Treasury regularly request our input and views and conversely contribute to our forums.

*Example:* Input to the ASIC/ACCC debt collection guidelines, membership of consultative bodies

- Identifying emerging policy issues and bringing them to the attention of government and industry, improving policy development and responses.

*Example:* The cost of calling 1800 and 13 numbers from mobile phones

*Example:* Working with the major banks, Beyondblue, Mental Health First Aid Australia and the financial counselling sector to develop National Mental Health Guidelines for use by the banking industry and our sector.

*Example:* Introduction of fee-free ATMs in remote Indigenous communities after an FCA report.



# WHAT WE DID, WHY IT MATTERS

Continuing a theme from last year's annual report, the focus in this section is to outline not just our activity (what we did), but whether and how it has made a difference.



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National standards for membership and accreditation are nearing finalisation.

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These standards will apply to all State and Territory financial counselling associations. The standards set out the requirements for continuing professional development (CPD) and supervision for financial counsellors.

Financial counsellors will be required to complete 20 CPD points per annum, with a minimum of one session from each of technical knowledge (eg credit law), skills (eg counselling) and ethics.

### Progress and Impact

Significant progress has been made and only a few issues remain for final decision. Consistent standards between all States and Territories is a big leap forward for the sector and a critical step in a truly national profession.

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A draft policy on complaint handling and disciplinary processes was released for consultation.

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As the financial counselling profession grows, there is a need for a consistent approach to complaint handling and disciplinary processes. Complaints about a financial counsellor can be made by clients or other financial counsellors. It is important that these are dealt with in a professional way and natural justice is accorded to all parties.

### Progress and Impact

The first draft of the policy has been developed and consultations with the State and Territory associations are ongoing. It is clear from these consultations that other work is also needed, for example, some State/Territory financial counselling associations will need to change their constitutions to enable them to adequately respond to complaints. We expect to finalise this policy in 2015.

Again, the development of a policy of this nature is a critical component in the evolution of any profession. Regulators, clients and our colleagues need to be confident that complaints and disputes will be handled appropriately.

There are more and more financial counsellors accessing the toolkit website

The toolkit website – [www.toolkit.org.au](http://www.toolkit.org.au) is a password protected website for financial counsellors who are members of their State/Territory financial counselling associations. We continued to improve the site, for example, including new resources on credit reporting and debt collection. The site also has the latest news relevant to financial counselling as well as job vacancies.

### Progress and Impact

Progress in developing a full suite of resources for the toolkit website has not been as fast as we would like, largely because of FCA's resource constraints. We also need legal assistance to ensure that all resources adequately reflect the law. The impact of this site is significant, helping to foster more consistent, high quality service delivery. The website is now accessed by 500 financial counsellors from around Australia (up from 300 in 2013).

Financial counsellors are better equipped to assist clients with mental health issues

Mental Health First Aid finished the project on the development of mental health guidelines to assist financial counsellors if they have clients with mental health issues. Training on the new guidelines was also rolled out across Australia. FCA helped to facilitate both processes. FCA is also involved in a parallel project with the banking industry in the development of guidelines.

### Progress and Impact

Anecdotal evidence suggests that more clients are presenting with mental health issues. This is an area therefore where we need ongoing, not one-off training into the future. We also need an implementation plan so that the guidelines are incorporated into financial counselling practice.

National Registration Numbers are rolling out

Every financial counsellor accessing the toolkit website is provided with a National Registration Number. This number can then be quoted by the financial counsellor in correspondence with external parties and is a tangible demonstration that the individual has met the required standard of supervision and professional development.

### Progress and Impact

About half of the financial counselling sector now has a NRN, but we hope this will move to 100% in the next 12 months. Our website developer has added an additional module that will allow selected creditors to verify the NRN to confirm they are dealing with a bona fide financial counsellor and to check contact details. This will help prevent people falsely representing that they are financial counsellors, and will identify those who are in breach of the 2013 legislated protection of the term 'financial counsellor'. Clients and creditors will be assured they are being assisted by a qualified and accredited professional.



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We are changing industry practices in assisting customers with unrecoverable debt

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FCA is involved in cooperative project with the debt collection industry—the National Hardship Register pilot. The NHR protects consumers in long term financial hardship from further debt collection activity. This group of people has low incomes, no significant assets and neither of these circumstances is likely to change. They could only pay creditors if they forgo essential expenses such as food and utility bills. Once a person is included on the register, the debt collectors involved in the NHR cease any debt collection activity. This is not only the right thing to do, but also avoids the expenditure of collection costs. Depending on the nature of the debt, at the end of three years, the debts may be waived. FCA is on the committee overseeing the Pilot and provides training to financial counsellors involved.

With the Australian Bankers' Association, and in consultation with Legal Aid NSW and Footscray Legal Centre, in September 2013, we also organised a workshop to discuss the issue of how the banking industry responds to long-term financial hardship.

### Progress and Impact

The NHR Pilot began on 1st January 2014. At the end of June 2014, about 30 people had been included. Feedback from clients, via financial counsellors is that the NHR is a positive step and provides the relief sought.

The banking industry recognises that there a small group of customers experiencing long-term financial hardship (they want to pay, but can't). Productive discussions continue about an industry-wide response. Pleasingly, two of the major banks already have effective processes for clients of financial counsellors with unrecoverable debt, including quick turn-around times for decision. This saves our sector time, is an enormous relief.

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Our first 'bank – financial counsellor operational meeting' in May 2014 focused on practical issues

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FCA held a very productive workshop with representatives from the financial counselling sector and the banking industry in May 2014 to discuss some of the day-to-day issues in our work. These included: the financial impacts and issues for people in prison or hospital, approaches to negotiation, circumstances where waiver of debt or interest is appropriate and communication barriers.

### Progress and Impact

Our organisation will repeat this workshop in May 2015 to track progress and address new issues. We are also pursuing one specific project as a result: the development of a secure web portal so that financial counsellors and banks can exchange emails and documents. At the moment, due to very real concerns about privacy and security, the banking industry cannot communicate about individual clients with financial counsellors by email. The web portal could potentially be part of the toolkit website.

The Debt Repayment Service is finally a reality

FCA have continued to work with the financial services industry to progress the establishment of a not-for-profit, free Debt Repayment Service (DRS) in Australia. The DRS assists consumers in financial difficulty who have the ability to repay some portion of their debts, but not the entire amount. The service negotiates an affordable repayment arrangement, usually for a portion of the debt and with no interest. The consumer then makes one payment to the service each month and this is distributed on a pro rata basis to creditors.

### Progress and Impact

The establishment of the DRS will give consumers an option that does not currently exist and may potentially assist thousands of people. The DRS will be another referral option for financial counsellors, in the same way that No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) is a referral option. The DRS was incorporated on 26th January 2014. The first clients will be accepted in late 2014.

We continued to work with a range of industries to improve hardship practices

This included:

- ongoing consultations with the Australian Bankers Association in relation to unrecoverable debt and the revision of their hardship industry guideline;
- launch of a best practice hardship guideline with the telco industry. The negotiation of this document took the best part of two years;
- release of “Hardship Policies in Practice: A Comparative Study” in September 2013. We also held a workshop with stakeholders to discuss the research findings to date and obtain their input to the final report.

### Progress and Impact

More Australians in financial difficulty get the assistance they need to get back on track. Feedback from industry indicates a range of benefits for them including more effective repayment arrangements for some customers.

We are one of the community partners with the University of Melbourne investigating Australia's bankruptcy regime

FCA is part of a successful Australian Research Council grant with the law school at the University of Melbourne that will assess the effectiveness of Australia's personal insolvency laws. Part of the project methodology involves a survey of financial counsellors, but we will also be involved in other aspects.

### Progress and Impact

The project is in its early stages, but will begin in earnest in early 2015. Empirical research at the Law School has revealed a dramatic increase in the levels of personal insolvency in the past two decades and that it is an increasingly middle-class phenomenon. Financial counsellors will be able to provide a unique perspective on how well the bankruptcy regime is working.

The DebtSelfHelp website continues to fill a gap for people who can self-help

The debtselfhelp website was launched in 2012. The site is designed for people who are in financial difficulty, but armed with the right information, can help themselves. The site also refers people to the 1800 007 007 service and face to face services, so it has a dual purpose for those who need more intensive assistance. The site includes nearly 50 fact sheets, letter templates, some videos and an innovative self-help tool.

### Progress and Impact

The site averages around 6,000 visitors per month (up from 600 in the last financial year). The site is linked to by a range of government organisations, including ASIC's MoneySmart, AFSA, yougov. The most popular page is the self help tool. This provides a tailored assessment about options to address debt.

We are doing more work on credit reporting issues

With the introduction of comprehensive credit reporting, issues about how well the system is working for consumers become more important. FCA is very concerned that consumers are not being given equal access to free credit reports as required by the law and that those reports are equivalent to the paid versions.

### Progress and Impact

Working with our colleagues the Financial Rights Legal Centre and the Consumer Action Law Centre, FCA has raised concerns about compliance with the law by a credit bureau with the Privacy Commissioner.

We produced a Credit Law Update on comprehensive credit reporting for the financial counselling sector. We are also producing an online training module on credit reporting. This will be the first national resource of this nature.

We continued to support the national phone financial counselling helpline 1800 007 007 - as it goes from strength to strength

FCA continued to support the national phone financial counselling helpline 1800 007 007 as it goes from strength to strength. The total volume of calls to the Helpline across Australia for 2013-14 was 135,090. Calls to the Helpline have increased over each of the past four financial years. To put this in perspective, the average monthly total call volume in 2013-14 was 11,250. This is more than the total call volume for the entire 2010-11 financial year of 11,191 calls.

### Progress and Impact

There is significant potential for the eight state-based organisations that deliver the national phone financial counselling service to enhance service delivery. These include the development of a quality framework and an investigation of how to share technology to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The 1800 service is dramatically increasing access to financial counselling.



# JAN PENTLAND FOUNDATION

FCA continued to provide administrative support to the Jan Pentland Foundation. The Foundation honours a former chair of FCA, Jan Pentland who died in tragic circumstances in August 2009.



The Foundation holds an annual dinner coinciding with the FCA Conference. The winners of the Jan Pentland Scholarship (for a person to study financial counselling) and the Jan Pentland Prize (for outstanding achievement in advancing financial counselling/social justice) are announced at the dinner.

The 2014 scholarship winners were:

- Carly Baker
- Aunty Joy Reid
- Grant Rowe
- Husan Ruzehaji
- Alison Waters.

Aunty Joy's scholarship was made available through the generous donation of David Parkin. David, an Aussies rule legend, was a keynote speaker at the 2014 FCA Conference and donated his speaker's fee to the Foundation.

The Jan Pentland Prize was awarded to Phil Powell. Phil is a well-loved financial counsellor in Tasmania and has been FCA's Treasurer for over 10 years.

## TO MAKE A DONATION:

### BY DIRECT CREDIT TO THE FOUNDATION'S BANK ACCOUNT:

Name: Jan Pentland Foundation Ltd as trustee for the Jan Pentland Foundation  
BSB: 013 006 Account No: 9035 40139

### BY CHEQUE

Make cheques payable to the Jan Pentland Foundation Limited, and post to:

c/- Financial Counselling Australia  
PO Box 3482  
South Brisbane. Qld 4101

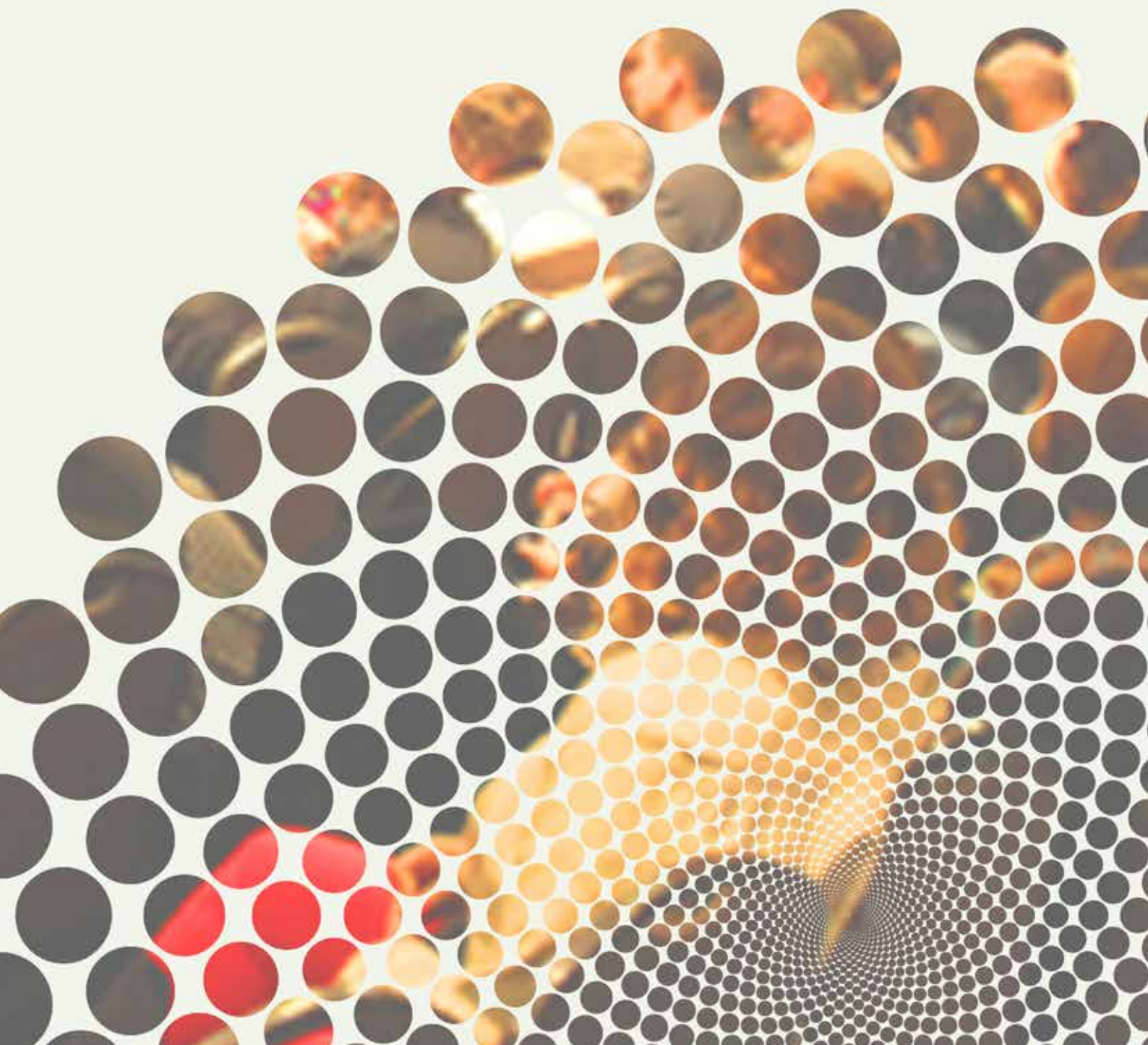
Donations to the Foundation are tax deductible.



# CONFERENCE AND ASSOCIATED EVENTS

Our very successful annual conference, held in Melbourne in May, was attended by over 500 people.

This was a record number.





Attendees who completed the post-conference survey rated the conference 8.2 out of 10 and 93% said they'd come back next year. This year, FCA again included two pre-conference "twilight workshops" for people traveling from interstate to maximise their time away. One workshop was a 'Centrelink Forum" (87 attendees) and the other was on "Writing Skills" (60 attendees).

The keynote speakers at the conference included Tim Ferguson (former comedian who spoke about his experiences with MS) and David Parkin, who spoke about the importance of teamwork and vision. There were plenary sessions on fines and infringements, Centrelink and hardship practices across industries. We also launched the Mental Health Guidelines and the Telco Hardship Framework. Concurrent sessions included: casework issues, supervision skills, advanced bankruptcy, assisting clients with grief and loss and understanding others. A new innovation in a concurrent session was the use of "buzz sessions" where participants chose four topics from the six on offer, moving to a new presenter at the end of each presentation. They were called "buzz" for a reason.

The "Industry in the (Hardship) Spotlight" was a fast-paced presentation from 25 organisations telling us in a minute about their progress assisting those in financial hardship. A poll at the end of the session disclosed the banking industry had made the most progress. The debt collection industry also rated highly. Energy, water and telcos had fewer responses. These results will help guide our future policy and engagement strategies.

Administrative support was provided to the "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Forum" – a one-day workshop for financial counsellors and money management who work with Indigenous clients. The program is put together by a steering group of practitioners. We thank the Government for the specific funding that helped cover the costs of attendance for many of the participants, the majority of whom work in rural or remote communities.

In collaboration with FCA, the External Dispute Resolution schemes ran the EDR Forum—with a record attendance of over 320 people. We also ran a host of pre and post conference workshops and meetings capitalising on having so many financial counsellors and industry representatives in the same place at the time. These included a pre-conference workshop for managers of financial counselling agencies, a workshop for organisations delivering the Diploma of Community Services (Financial Counselling), a planning day for the FCA Board and State/Territory Presidents and a bank/financial counsellor operational meeting.

Dinner functions included the Jan Pentland Dinner as well as "Portraits Alive", where attendees, over a stand up dinner, watched 10 accomplished portrait artists paint 10 models, all of whom were associated with our sector in some way. Portraits Alive was an extraordinary event—you had to be there.

# POLICY ISSUES

Some of the issues arising in financial counselling casework affect large numbers of people. Often, changes in policy or practice can prevent or ameliorate these problems. Financial counsellors are also well placed to identify emerging issues.



FCA made seven submissions to government on policy and legislative issues during this reporting period and released four reports. We were particularly concerned at the introduction of a fee for a person to file a debtor's petition for bankruptcy. The title of the short survey we undertook of the sector soon after the introduction of the fee said it all: "Too Poor to go Bankrupt". We were pleased therefore when the fee was removed after two months.

Below we have highlighted three of the issues arising in financial counselling casework where change is needed in either the regulatory environment or business practices.

#### RENTAL CONTRACTS AND CENTREPAY

In 2013-14, one clear trend has been the increasing problems financial counsellors report with clients who have entered into a consumer lease—often advertised in the marketplace as "rent to buy" contracts. Like payday loans, which continue to be a problem, a rental contract is an expensive financial product, with goods costing between three and five times the retail price. More financial counselling clients have rental contracts they are struggling to pay.

Exacerbating this problem is access by rental companies to the bill-paying service run by Centrelink, called Centrepay. Because rental companies have access to Centrepay, people receiving social security benefits are effectively prioritising loan expenditure over food. This is because Centrepay payments are made first with the balance of the benefit then transferred to the consumer's bank account. Rental companies could instead use the direct debit system, which would encourage more responsible lending.

#### BUDGETING SERVICES

Services offering to set up a workable budget and manage an individual or family's expenses are a feature of the Australian marketplace. While these services can be useful for some clients and have their place, financial counsellors also saw clients who had been let down by poor quality service. Issues include unworkable budgets, incorrect prioritisation of expenditure so that some bills are paid and others are not (which can have serious consequences, for example if insurance is unpaid) and high set up and ongoing charges.

#### BUSINESSES TARGETING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES

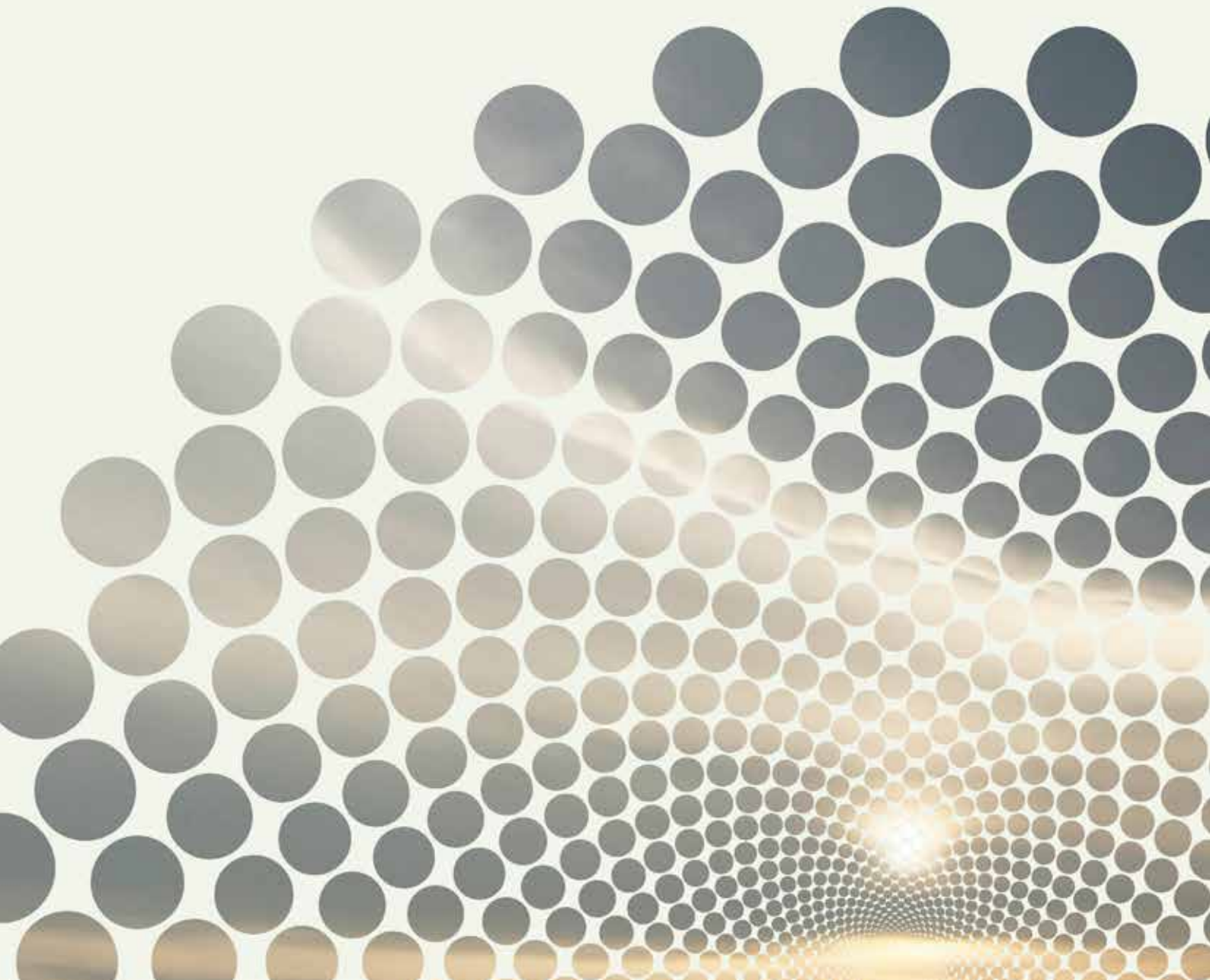
Some of the worst predatory or unconscionable practices are those targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with some businesses taking advantage of the low financial literacy of some community members. Financial counsellors are well placed to both educate their clients about these businesses and also to alert regulators to the outright scams. Rental contracts (see above) are a big problem, as are door-to-door sales and funeral insurance. Over-priced family portrait packages and hampers of food or goods, paid for by installment are common. Phone calls or social media contact are used by scammers to trick people into sending money overseas. Our regulators, ASIC and the ACCC and various legal aid commissions do some excellent work in this area, but the problems continue.



# MONTH BY MONTH

## Cost-Benefit Analysis

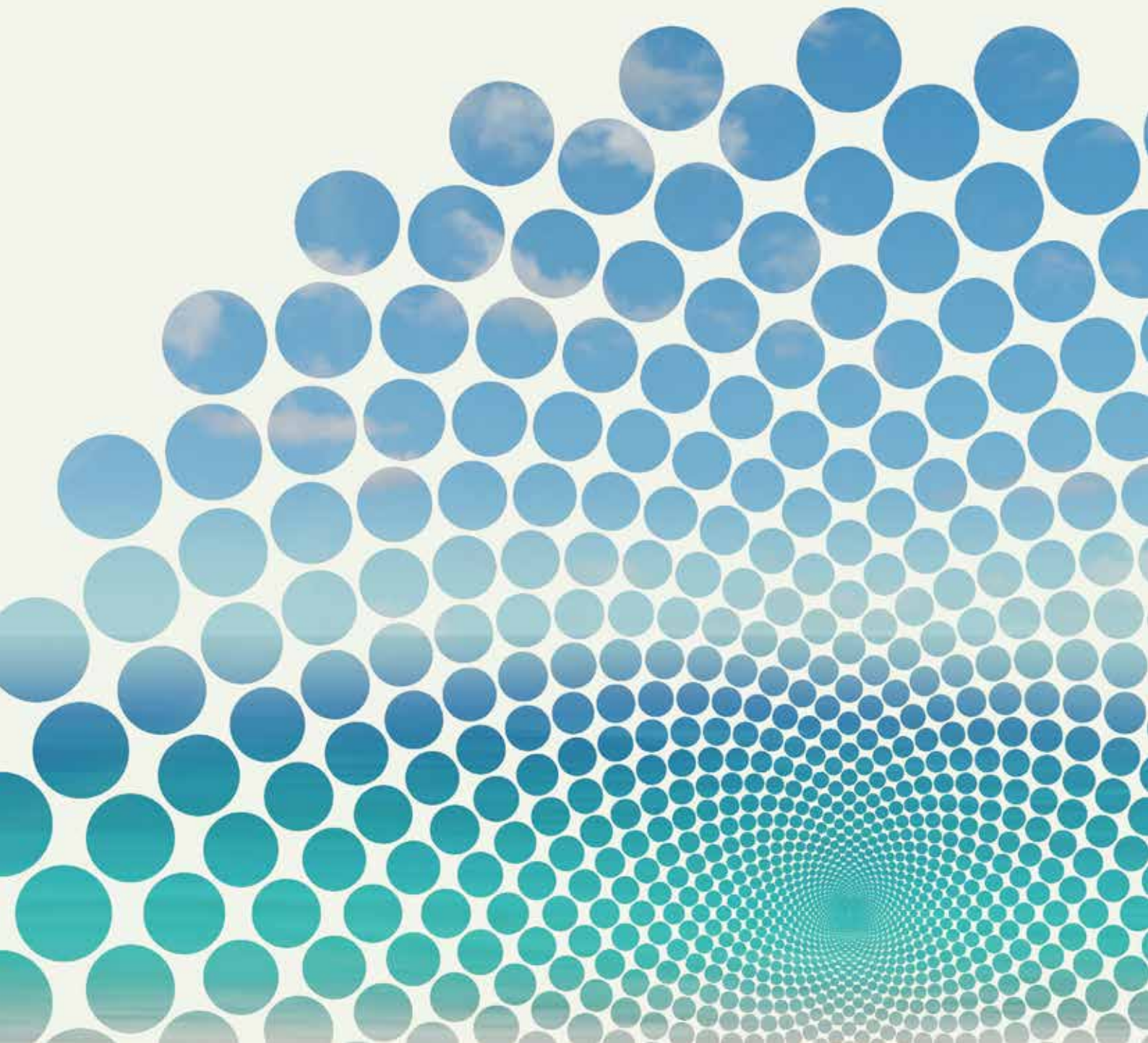
One highlight this year was the release in March 2014 by the Wyatt Foundation of a [cost-benefit analysis](#) of financial counselling. Completed by the Australian Workplace Innovation and Social Research Centre at Adelaide University, the research showed that every \$1 invested provides a \$5 return.



JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
FCA Board resolved to become a member of the Debt Repayment Service. The organisation's involvement in the DRS is a way of ensuring the service operates in the best interest of people who may be clients.	FCA put together two short resources about financial counselling—a one page infographic and “how does a financial counsellor help?”	60 people attended the workshop FCA conducted about comparative hardship practices across industries. We agreed on six priority areas for action.
October	November	December
Mental Health First Aid rolled out training in Australia for financial counsellors to assist them with clients who have mental health issues.	FCA conducted the financial counselling workforce survey, covering demography, working environment, attitudes and client issues.	FCA and the State/Territory associations sent hand-written Christmas cards to all Federal politicians as part of our awareness and re-funding campaign.
January	February	March
The National Hardship Register pilot began. FCA released the “Funding Snapshot”, the first comprehensive analysis and comparison of Federal and State Government funding for financial counselling.	FCA settled on a positioning statement for financial counselling that clearly defines the service and the value financial counsellors bring to the Australian community. This one line statement means we have a consistent message. You can see it in the footer of each page of this report.	With the Australian Bankers Association, and in consultation with Legal Aid NSW and Footscray Legal Centre, FCA ran a special workshop about dealing with customers in long-term hardship. A law update was released for the sector about comprehensive credit reporting.
April	May	June
FCA released “Click Here: Who is Referring to Financial Counselling Services?” This report shows how financial counselling is embedded in the service delivery system, with all of the major banks, a number of major government departments, finance industry peak bodies and dispute resolution schemes including information on their websites explaining how people can access financial counselling.	FCA were busy with the FCA Conference and the EDR Forum and the many associated events. One of the most important events was a bank/financial counsellor operational issues meeting. Our organisation was part of the launch of best practice guidelines in the telecommunications industry for responding to customers in hardship.	Version 2 of the Financial Counsellor Authorisation was released. This form was developed originally with the banking industry, but its use has now been extended to telecommunications.  FCA were part of a coalition of community groups that had argued against the introduction of debtor's fee to go bankrupt. We were relieved when this fee was scrapped.

# WHAT IS ON THE HORIZON?

The coming year will see FCA finalise a number of long-running projects, and we are looking forward to some new challenges.





## IMPORTANT PROJECTS THAT WILL BE COMPLETED

- The roll out of the national registration numbers and creditor access to this information, so that creditors can verify they are dealing with a bona fide financial counsellor.
- Adding additional functionality to the toolkit website to allow financial counsellors to record their own professional development and supervision sessions on their own profiles.

## NEW CHALLENGES

- On behalf of the 1800 007 077 national phone financial counselling services, FCA was successful in an application to Financial Literacy Australia for a grant to **build a national website focused on credit and debt issues**. This site may eventually replace the three existing consumer websites (debtsselfhelp.org.au, moneyhelp.org.au and financialrights.org.au) and add new self-help tools and guidance.  
A major component of the project will be to upgrade the existing debt self-help tool. The tool allows users to enter their own personal information—such as income, assets, debts—and receive a tailored assessment about their options. This tool is unique in Australia and a number of organisations link to it, including ASIC’s MoneySmart. The self-help tool is modelled on the successful UK service Stepchange, where their website assists more people than their phone or face to face services.
- **Developing a Knowledge Management System** about credit and debt issues. If we do this sensibly, the information could be at two levels or layers: straightforward plain English information for a consumer website, but more detailed information, able to be accessed by financial counsellors. The KMS could possibly sit on the new site described above.
- **Setting up a charitable trust** that could accept voluntary industry donations from various industries for financial counselling services. The trust structure would help in managing conflict of interest issues. A number of industries benefit from financial counselling, including banking, telecommunications, utilities, insurance and debt collection. All of these industries could be potential contributors.
- Investigating—and implementing if feasible—**technological solutions to improve financial counselling service delivery**. This will include the secure portal for communication between banks and financial counsellors.
- **Coordinating training across the financial counselling sector**, including national resources and agreeing the focus for continuing professional development and a calendar of events.
- **Ongoing policy work** around Centrepay (consumer leases), for-profit financial difficulty businesses and unrecoverable debt.

# THANK YOU

A very sincere thanks to everyone who has worked with FCA over the past 12 months—from government, industry, regulators, consumer organisations and financial counsellors.

Specific thanks to the:

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network for the grant that enabled us to conduct research into comparative hardship practices across industry;

Australian Securities and Investments Commission for the training on the National Credit Code offered around Australia to financial counsellors in early 2014. The training was very popular and there were waiting lists for most venues;

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman for the facilitative role they played in the development of best practice hardship guidelines for telecommunications companies.

We are looking forward to working with all of our stakeholders in 2015.

