



WOMEN'S ***MONEY*** MATTERS

A financial resource
for older women in
the ACT



whmi
women's centre for health matters •

Introduction

Financial security is an important aspect of the health and wellbeing of women in the ACT and access to good information is crucial in maintaining independence and facilitating choice. Women have very different financial needs than men and are more likely to require financial support or advice at particular life stages or relationship changes.

Because women tend to live longer, whatever resources they have accumulated need to last for longer. And life events such as the death of a spouse, divorce and separation, a health episode, or acquiring a disability are more likely to have a financial impact on older single women. We know from research that most single older women will be poorer than men their age, less able to maintain home ownership, and less able to compete in the private rental market. They are likely to have spent less time in paid employment, and to have accumulated less superannuation than men because they earned less over their working lives (due to lower wages, and reliance on part-time work or intermittent work combined with carer responsibilities for children or older relatives).

This resource aims to provide single older women (and their friends or family members, or services who may be supporting them) with local, accessible and reliable information to help guide them with their specific needs, and to help improve their financial knowledge and access to support in the ACT.

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About the Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM)

WCHM is a community based organisation which works in the ACT and surrounding region to improve women's health and wellbeing. WCHM believes that the environment and life circumstances which each woman experiences affects her health outcomes. WCHM focuses on areas of possible disadvantage and uses social research, advocacy, community development and health promotion to provide information and skills that can empower ACT women to enhance their own health and wellbeing.

WOMEN'S MONEY MATTERS!

A financial resource for older single women in the ACT

Who is this resource for?

You may be a single woman in the ACT who is over 55, who has experienced a change in your circumstances or a relationship change, and be unsure of what financial support is available to you, and what financial issues you need to think about.

Or you may be a friend or a family member of someone who is in this situation and want to know how to help them to know what financial support is available in the ACT.

Or you may be an ACT service provider looking for information to support a woman who has accessed your service.

No matter which situation applies to you, this resource aims to provide you with useful local ACT information and advice about how to access assistance with managing money, budgeting, debts and bills; banking options; how to access financial support for housing, health, transport and food etc; what legal advice is available; using financial products and services; and what local financial support services are available.

Disclaimer:

Please note that this resource should not be considered as legal advice or financial counselling. The information provided is general in nature, and everyone's situation is different.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this resource is accurate at the time of publishing, but readers are advised to seek specific advice and information in relation to their particular situation from the financial, legal and other local services detailed in this resource.

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Who can I talk to about money and my finances?

You might not know where to start and need to talk to someone about your money and finances. Managing your money can be a big challenge when there are changes in your life or you might be having trouble knowing how to access money and other support which you might be eligible for.

And while it can be helpful to get the opinions of your family and friends on financial matters, it is best to seek independent advice. Financial advice can help you make the most of your money, get any government assistance you're entitled to, feel more in control of your finances and your life, avoid expensive mistakes and protect your finances and assets.

In Canberra there are financial counselling services which can give you free, confidential and practical financial advice and information. These services have experience with helping women who need help at a particular stage of their life or when their situation has changed and they need support and advice. They can also offer support and practical assistance to help you with any debts, and with general financial planning and budgeting.

What is a financial counsellor?

Financial counsellors are qualified professionals who can help you deal with financial issues. Their services are free, independent, non-judgemental and confidential. They generally work in community organisations and provide information, support and advocacy.

A financial counsellor can help you get a clear picture of your financial situation and develop strategies to get you back in control of your money – whether it's creating effective personal budgets, helping you organise your financial information, suggesting ways to improve your financial situation, working out manageable repayment plans, negotiating with your creditors, seeing if you're eligible for government assistance, explaining debt recovery procedures, bankruptcy and other alternatives, or addressing a financial crisis caused by problems such as health, unemployment, or family break-up.

You can talk to a financial counsellor about the following kinds of financial issues:

- Help with budgeting and access to financial support
- Advice about financial matters like taxation, superannuation and Centrelink
- How to handle your debts
- How to negotiate with creditors
- Dealing with accounts or bills
- How to live on a lower income

Financial counselling services do not provide money, vouchers or emergency relief.

Care Inc. Financial Counselling Service

Care's services are free for people on low to moderate incomes. Care Financial Counselling Service can provide you with financial counselling information, casework and advocacy; work with you to develop a plan to improve your situation; if appropriate, negotiate with the people you owe money to; and refer you to other assistance if necessary.

Website: www.carefcs.org

Address: Level 4, CCG House
219 London Cct
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

Ph: 02 6257 1788

Email: admin@carefcs.org

Opening hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm

After hours support: A drop-In service is available on Wednesday night between 5.30pm and 7.30pm. Please arrive by 6pm to ensure you are seen. This service provides information and assistance with filling in forms but does not provide advocacy.

You can also leave a message on Care's after hours message bank on 1800 007 007 or 6257 1788 and a financial counsellor will call you back.

If you are distressed about your financial situation after office hours you can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Salvation Army's Moneycare, Canberra

The Salvation Army's Moneycare service provides free and confidential financial counselling for people facing financial difficulties or wanting to avoid financial difficulties in the future. They are able to help with a range of issues including budgeting, credit, debt and repossession. Phone your local centre for an appointment.

Website: <https://salvos.org.au/need-help/financial-assistance/financial-counselling/>

Address: various locations across Canberra
<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/locations>

Phone: 1300 371 288

Please note that not all Moneycare services are full time and that due to demand for services there may be a waiting period before an appointment is available.

Who can I talk to about legal advice to protect my money and finances?

While it can be helpful to get the opinions of your family and friends on financial matters, you need to think carefully about getting expert independent legal advice.

Remember that as you age you may become more reliant on others for assistance. In relation to your finances it is important that you retain control by remaining fully informed about your financial situation and not letting someone else take over for you. It may not always be possible for you to physically pay your bills but you maintain control over your money by sighting the bills, making decisions about how and when payments will be made, and writing/signing cheques or arranging electronic transfers while you are able to.

In some situations, it will be important that you get legal advice to understand and protect your finances and your financial rights or entitlements. For example, if you are separating from your husband or partner you should seek separate legal advice about your particular circumstances. You might also need advice and expert support if your partner dies, you are considering changing your will, you are being pressured by family to go guarantor for their loans or to sign over personal funds, real estate or your pension, or real estate. Or if you need advice about mortgages, credit cards and personal loans, or and changes to your will or to the beneficiary of any superannuation policy you may have.

Never sign anything unless you are sure of what you are signing and what it means. Don't feel forced to change your will, or to sign a power of attorney. Never be afraid to ask questions and don't agree to sign legal documents without independent legal advice.

And sometimes money and debt problems can develop into legal problems. If you are on a low to moderate income, you can access free and confidential legal advice and referral in the ACT.

The Women's Legal Centre

The Women's Legal Centre is a community legal centre for women in Canberra and the surrounding area. The Centre is run by women and aims to improve women's access to justice. The Centre advises on a wide range of legal problems such as domestic violence; divorce and separation; disputes over children; property settlement; child support; going to court; unfair dismissal; and other employment rights.

If you need more assistance or if your problem is outside the Centre's area of expertise, the Centre also offers referral to appropriate lawyers and other support services.

Website: <https://womenslegalact.org/>

Phone: 02 6257 4377

Email: admin@wlc.org.au

Women who do not speak English can contact the Centre through the Translating and Interpreting Service: **TIS 131 450**. The Centre can also arrange an appointment with an interpreter.

Women with hearing or speech difficulties who use a TTY or computer modem can contact the Centre through Australian Communication Exchange's National Relay Service: **13 25 44** and ask for **(02) 6257 4499**.

The Centre also offers an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Law and Justice Support Program. The Program has an Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO) who can have a yarn with you and help you work out what to do to about your problem. Call the Women's Legal Centre and ask to speak with the ILO.

Consumer Law Centre

The Consumer Law Centre is a non-profit community legal centre that provides free legal advice and assistance to low and moderate income consumers. They specialise in the areas of consumer credit (mortgages, credit cards and personal loans), debt recovery, banking, simple contracts, general fair trading and consumer protection, trading and consumer protection.

Website <http://www.carefcs.org/consumer-law-centre-act.html>

Phone: 02 6257 1788.

What do I need to think about in relation to my money and banking?

You may have concerns and questions about banking or managing your banking to save you money.

Managing and banking my money

There are lots of choices to make when it comes to managing and banking your money, but there are a few things you need to think about:

1. Different types of accounts

Basically, there are three main types of accounts. These include:

- **Transaction or everyday accounts**

These are the most basic and common type of bank accounts and are generally used to receive pays or basic benefits, to take out cash and to pay bills.

- **Savings accounts**

These accounts are used to hold money as savings and are designed to help savings increase, as they tend to have a higher interest rate than basic transaction or everyday accounts. Some savings accounts make it harder for you to access your money, so this makes it less tempting to dip into your savings.

- **Joint accounts**

Joint accounts involve two or more people in the one account, which means that both parties can contribute and access money in the same account. If your circumstances have changed you may want to think about a separate bank account in your sole name.

2. Fees and charges

Find a bank account that has the lowest fees and charges possible, as this will help you will keep more of your own money. There are some basic low-cost bank accounts specifically designed for pensioners and seniors (from 50 years old in some cases), but check with your bank for more information. Look for a basic bank account that offers:

- No account keeping fees
- Free monthly statements
- No minimum deposit amounts
- No overdrawn fees
- The ability to set up and cancel direct debits for free
- Free and unlimited transactions

Make sure you get a copy of the ‘terms and conditions’ for the account you choose. This will tell you information about fees, charges and interest.

3. Fee free accounts

If you are eligible for a Pensioner or Centrelink Health Care Concession Card you may be able to get a fee free account from your bank or credit union if your Centrelink payment is paid into that account. But you may still have a limit on the number of transactions you can make on your account each month and if you go over this number there may be a fee.

The fee free accounts may also have limited interest rates, so if you want to save or can afford to put away even just a little bit of money each fortnight, then a savings account might be better.

4. Other benefits

You might also want to think about the convenience of accessing facilities such as branch access, cash withdrawals, EFTPOS, ATMs, cheques, direct debit, Bpay or debit card.

5. Processing of payments

Different banks have different processing periods for receiving and transferring money. Even though you make a payment to someone on a particular day, it might not arrive on the same day. Transfers may take a couple of days to be credited to another person’s account (particularly if they use a different bank), and this may also be the case for money paid into your account.

If you are worried about how long it will take to receive a payment or to pay somebody else, talk with your bank about their processing times.

Handy tip!

Try to pay your bills a few days earlier than the due date if you can. This will make sure your payment is processed on time.

If you receive a Centrelink payment you might also like to sign up for Centrepay. This will make sure your bills are paid on time and may help ease some of the stress of paying bills.

Need more information:

For more information check out the Moneysmart website. This has a list of basic bank accounts and other useful information about how to choose one:

<https://moneysmart.gov.au/banking/transaction-accounts-and-debit-cards> .

Bank staff are employed to help with your banking needs. If you don't feel comfortable asking them for help you may want to ask a family member or friend to come with you when you visit the bank.

There are also community organisations which can help you sort out your banking, such as Care Financial Counselling.

Opening a bank account

If you need to open a bank account before, during or after you leave violence the first thing to think about is what you want from a bank account. Have a look through the above section "What do I need to think about when I bank my money?" for information. Then follow the below steps on opening an account.

1. Visit a bank branch or go online

Once you know what you want you can compare what the banks and credit unions have to offer by visiting their websites or visiting them at a branch during opening hours.

2. Start your application

After you have made a decision to open a bank account the next step is to start an application. You can either visit a bank or credit union branch during business hours or go online at any time of the day to do this.

You will need to fill out an application form. The bank teller should be able to help you with this. You could also bring along a friend or family member to help you if you are feeling nervous about filling out forms.

You will need to have identification like a Drivers Licence or passport with you if you are opening a new account at a new bank. You can also bring along any concession cards you have which may give you access to fee free accounts.

Before you open your account, you will be required to agree to the terms and conditions of the account. This will either be electronically by ticking a box or by signing your name on paper.

3. Wait for your application to be processed

When you have finished your application there will be a processing time. Depending on what account you have chosen and where you are banking this processing time can be around 5-10 business days.

4. Start banking!

Once your application is processed and you have received your EFTPOS card you can now start banking. Remember to keep any documentation relating to your banking in a safe spot. Never disclose your pin and be sure to bank safely and securely.

Ways I can access my money

Automatic Teller Machines or ATMs (additional fees and charges)

ATMs are a common way for people to access their money and accounts. They are convenient as they are generally open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is important to remember that not all ATMs are the same. To avoid paying more than the money you withdraw, try to follow these guidelines:

- Always try to withdraw your money from your own bank or credit union's ATMs.
- If you use another bank or credit union's ATM you will be charged a fee. This is generally about \$2 to \$3 per transaction but can add up very quickly and eat into your money. Check out where the nearest ATMs for your bank or credit union are and remember them!
- Check the number of free withdrawals you are allowed in a month with your bank or credit union. Sometimes banks limit the number of withdrawals you are allowed to make and charge you a fee if you go over this.
- Don't keep checking your bank account balance using an ATM, as this counted as a transaction and may cost you money or use up your free transactions.
- Plan your withdrawals. Sometimes you might not be able to find a free ATM and have to use one that charges a fee.
- When you use an ATM always be sure to protect your pin. If a machine looks like it has been tampered with or you do not feel safe try to find another ATM or return at another time.

Supermarket withdrawals of money

You can withdraw money at most supermarkets if you're buying goods there. When you go through the checkout you can ask or will be asked by the cashier if you would like to withdraw money. This is a great way to access your money for free. It also won't affect your transaction limit and can help prevent unexpected fees and charges on your next statement. Here are some tips on withdrawing money at the supermarket:

- Before you go shopping think about what other money you might need in cash. This way you can plan your withdrawal and avoid having to keep withdrawing money all the time.
- Beware that some supermarkets require a minimum purchase amount before you are allowed to withdraw money. This can end up costing you more money because you may have to buy items you may not need to make up the minimum purchase price.
- There are some supermarkets where you don't have to buy anything to get cash out. Have a look around and see what works best for you.

Bank branch withdrawals of money

If you need help to withdraw money or feel uncomfortable about using an ATM or a supermarket withdrawal you can generally withdraw money inside at your bank. If your bank or credit union does not offer branch withdrawals you can still ask them for help on how to withdraw.

A branch withdrawal will require you to either fill out a withdrawal slip and give it to a teller, or to use your EFTPOS card which is linked to the account. Be aware that you will usually have to pay a fee for these transactions so it's best to avoid them if you can.

Internet and phone transfers of money

Most banks offer internet and phone banking. You can use these services to transfer money within your own accounts or to someone else's account. You can also pay bills by BPAY or direct credit transfer using a retailer code (displayed on the bill).

To use this service you will need to contact your bank and set up an internet or phone password. Every time you access your accounts by telephone or internet you will need to enter or quote your password.

Be aware that there may be some fees for this type of banking. Check with your bank to see if they charge for transactions like BPAY or direct credit transfers. Remember you will also still have to pay for the cost of the phone call or any internet data you used while banking.

When using these services always be sure that your connection is secure. To prevent the person using violence or anyone else accessing your bank account never use a public computer or free wireless hotspot when banking.

If you do not have any option other than to use public internet access points be sure to completely log out and erase your internet browsing history and any passwords that may have been stored. When using phone banking, always be sure you are in a private location.

Direct Debit payments

You can allow access to your account by someone you owe money to regularly - like an electricity or telecommunications company. A direct debit means you have agreed that a set amount can be deducted by that company or person on certain dates.

This may be a handy way to pay your bills regularly and on time but be aware that it can be costly! This is because a small fee for each direct debit you set up may be charged. You could also be charged if you do not have enough money in your

account when the debt is due to be taken. It may be easier to manage debts if you can have more control over transfers of your money.

Tip: Always double and triple check the details!

When you transfer money from your account to someone else's account be sure that you have their bank, BSB and account numbers correct. You don't want your money going to the wrong place!

Pin and password protection

It is really important to keep your personal information secure.

Remember:

- Never tell anyone your PIN number. You should be the only person that can access your money.
- If you use internet or phone banking don't tell anyone your password or access code.
- If you find it hard to remember your password or access code tell the bank and they can help you change it to something you will remember.
- Always make sure your internet is safe! If you can try to avoid using public computers. Log out of banking sites and erase your browsing history. If you use a home computer, always make sure your internet security is up to date.

Separation and my finances

Whatever stage of separation you are at, separating your finances is a major part of having individual financial security. Taking action safely, quickly and with the right support and advice may help ease the burden post separation.

Your existing account

If you have an existing bank account you may want to continue using this account or banking facility. However, if your account is known and accessible to your partner they will have access to all your funds.

Joint accounts

If you have a joint account which you are both able to access without the permission of the other account holder, your partner may be able to misuse the funds left in the account. This means they could withdraw all the money, overdraw the account, freeze the account or close it down.

If you have a joint account with your partner and are concerned about this, contact your bank immediately.

The bank should be able to help you to protect your shared funds until an arrangement can be made. The bank may be able to freeze the account – if an account is frozen get legal advice as soon as possible.

You can get free legal advice and information in the ACT from the **Women's Legal Centre** 02 6257 4499 (Monday to Friday 9.30am to 12noon); the **Consumer Law Centre** 1800 007 007 or the **Legal Aid Office ACT** 1300 654 314 (Monday- Friday from 8:30am-5pm).

Secondary card holder

If your partner is a secondary card holder to your bank account you will need to close off their access to your account. Contact your bank or financial institution to cancel this arrangement as soon as you can.

What if my partner knows my account details, pin and passwords?

If your partner knows your account details, like your credit card number, or pins and passwords to things like EFTPOS, credit cards, online or telephone banking you will need to contact your bank as soon as possible. They can reissue new cards and pin numbers and help you to set up new passwords.

It is important to keep your pin and passwords secret to protect your finances and your identity!

What if my partner has frozen our joint account and/or withdrawn all the money?

If your partner has withdrawn all the money or frozen a joint account you will also need to get legal advice. Unfortunately, the withdrawal of all money from a joint account by an ex-partner can happen. If the account has been set up so that both parties can access the account without the other party's permission there are essentially no safeguards in place and compensation generally does not occur. That is why it is important to act quickly if you have a joint account.

What if I have gone guarantor for my partner?

You may have gone guarantor for your partner. This may have happened because they didn't have the credit history to get a loan. Generally a lender or creditor will ask for someone to 'go guarantor' if there is a risk to the loan not being repaid as agreed.

If you are a guarantor, you are responsible for the repayment of a loan if the borrower does not pay. A guarantor is legally liable to pay the borrower's debt if the borrower stops paying and the credit provider has been unable to recover the money from the borrower. ***If you have been forced or coerced into going guarantor or you did not know what you were signing always seek legal advice.***

If you are a guarantor and you are asked to pay a debt, seek advice from a free legal service or financial counsellor about how to proceed.

As a general rule it is always best to avoid being a guarantor on a loan. This type of debt can cause great difficulty between the parties involved particularly during separation or divorce and also between parents and children/grandchildren. Always seek advice about the implications of becoming a guarantor for someone else's debt ***before*** you enter into any agreement so that you understand fully what it means. Occasionally people lose valuable assets, like their homes, if they have to repay a debt that they have guaranteed.

What about my superannuation?

At first, superannuation will probably be the furthest thing from your mind. Once you are ready, sorting out your superannuation is a really important step to help set yourself up financially for the future. In a separation or divorce, superannuation is considered a type of shared asset or property. Under an agreement or by court order it can be divided between both parties.

You will be able to find more information about this on the Family Law Court's website at

<http://www.familycourt.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/fcoaweb/family-law-matters/property-and-finance/superannuation/>

and on the Attorney General's Department website at

<http://www.ag.gov.au/FamiliesAndMarriage/Families/SuperSplitting/Pages/default.aspx>.¹

You can also get free legal advice and information in the ACT from the **Women's Legal Centre** 02 6257 4377.

Finding my Superannuation: How do I find and consolidate my Super funds?

It is a good idea to keep track of your superannuation by bringing all superannuation together or 'consolidating' it into one account. Over the years you may have worked for different employers and held different superannuation accounts. You may have also changed your name or address. Sometimes this means you will have superannuation in different accounts.

You can do this by first searching for any lost or unclaimed superannuation through the Australian Taxation Office's (ATO) quick online search. You will need to provide your name, date of birth and tax file number.

¹ <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/life-events-and-you/life-events/divorce-or-separation>

<https://www.ato.gov.au/forms/searching-for-lost-super/>

To keep track of your super you can also register for the ATO's online services at <https://www.ato.gov.au/general/online-services/>

Through these services you can:

- Check all your super accounts
- Locate any lost super
- Locate any ATO-held super
- Transfer or consolidate super into a selected account

You can contact the ATO's Superseeker service for more information on locating lost super.

Phone: 132 865 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Website: <https://www.ato.gov.au/forms/searching-for-lost-super/>

Checking my superannuation statements

Remember to read your super statements thoroughly. When you receive your annual statement be sure to check:

- **The Balance**

Contact your super fund if the balance does not look correct.

- **Contributions**

Check if your employer's payments are being received by your account. If they aren't or they do not look right contact your super fund. If you have made contributions yourself to your fund, you should check if your contributions have been included.

- **Fees**

Check that you are not overpaying fees on your superannuation. High fees can eat into your money. For more information on super fund fees, like how to tell if you're paying high fees, how to compare fees or choose a new super fund see <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/superannuation-and-retirement/how-super-works/super-fees>. Or ask a financial counsellor.

- **Insurance**

Many super funds offer different types of insurance like life, disability and income protection. It is a good idea to check what you are covered for and how much you are paying out of your super for these.

- **Tax**

Your super will be taxed usually at a rate of 15%. If you think you are not being taxed correctly contact your super fund.

- **Investments**

Your super is invested by you or your super fund ideally to increase your super savings. Check that all investment returns, either negative or positive, are credited to your account. If you would like to know more about how your fund invests your super see the MoneySmart website at

<https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/superannuation-and-retirement/how-super-works/super-investment-options> or contact your super fund.

How can I boost my super?

You can boost your super by:

- **Salary sacrificing**

If you are working you can increase your super saving by increasing your contributions to your super account. This is often referred to as 'salary sacrificing'. Salary sacrificing means that you arrange with your employer to redirect more of your pay into your super fund on top of what they are already paying. To find out more about salary sacrificing visit

<https://moneysmart.gov.au/income-tax/salary-packaging>

or

[https://www.ato.gov.au/general/fringe-benefits-tax-\(fbt\)/in-detail/employees/salary-sacrifice-arrangements-for-employees/](https://www.ato.gov.au/general/fringe-benefits-tax-(fbt)/in-detail/employees/salary-sacrifice-arrangements-for-employees/)

- **After-tax contributions**

After-tax contributions are personal contributions you make to your super fund after you pay tax. Because you have already paid tax on the money you have earned, these contributions don't get taxed when your fund receives them. This might be an option for you if you have money to spare. For more information about after-tax contributions see

<https://www.ato.gov.au/Individuals/Super/Growing-your-super/Adding-to-your-super/Tax-on-contributions/> .

When can I access my super?

When you reach your 'preservation age' and are permanently retired you will be able to access all of your super. Depending on your birth year this could be between 55 to 60 years of age. You can use MoneySmart's Super and pension age calculator

to see what your preservation age is: <https://moneysmart.gov.au/how-super-works/getting-your-super>

If you have not yet permanently retired but are over 65 years of age you may still be able to access some of your super through a transition to retirement plan. Check MoneySmart's webpage for information on this option:

<https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/superannuation-and-retirement/income-sources-in-retirement/income-from-super/transition-to-retirement>.

Can I access my super early?

You might be thinking about trying to access your super early to deal with debt or for other reasons. It is important to know that access to superannuation should always be considered very carefully as it is a buffer for retirement and once spent it is usually difficult to rebuild. There are very restricted circumstances which let you access your superannuation before retirement age. Not all funds have the same early access rules and superannuation is never released for day to day expenses.

If you are experiencing financial difficulties, you may be able to access your superannuation if you meet the criteria for either Severe Financial Hardship or Specified Compassionate Grounds. Visit the Department of Human Services website for more information about early access to superannuation:

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/early-release-superannuation>

Protecting your super from scammers

Superannuation scams tend to promote early and easy access to super. These services, which operate illegally, actually leave you with less of your hard earned retirement savings, open to tax penalties and at risk of identity theft. If a deal sounds too good to be true and uses buzz words like 'unlock' or 'take control' of your super always be cautious! Get advice from a financial counsellor before you agree to anything. If you suspect a scam think about the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission's SCAMwatch golden rules:

- If it looks too good to be true—it probably is.
- **ALWAYS** get independent advice if an offer involves significant money, time or commitment.
- Remember there are no get-rich-quick schemes: the only people who make money are the scammers.
- Do not agree to offers or deals straight away: tell the person that you are not interested or that you want to get some independent advice before making a decision.
- You can [contact your local office of fair trading, ASIC or the ACCC for assistance](#).

- **NEVER** send money or give credit card or online account details to anyone you do not know and trust.
- Check your bank account and credit card statements when you get them. If you see a transaction you cannot explain, report it to your credit union or bank.
- Keep your credit and ATM cards safe. Do not share your personal identity number with anyone. Do not keep any written copy of your PIN with the card.²

If you suspect a scam or if you think you have been scammed contact **The SCAMwatch ACCC Infocentre on 1300 795 995 (Monday – Friday, 8.30 am to 6.00 pm, except National public holidays)**. Local call costs apply from landlines. Mobiles are charged at a higher rate and may not be included in your mobile plan or cap. 1800 numbers from your mobile.

² SCAMwatch 2014, 'How to protect yourself', Australian Competition & Consumer Commission website, accessed 24/03/2014: <<http://www.scamwatch.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/694076>>.

How can I deal with my debts?

Dealing with debt is difficult in general but at a crisis point it adds considerably to feeling worried or stressed. It's always better to try and deal with debts before they get larger and more costly. Even if you find yourself in what seems like an impossible situation financially, you can get advice and help to ease some of your financial stress.

Who can help me?

If you are unsure where to start and feel overwhelmed it might be good to get the help of a financial counsellor first.

What is a financial counsellor?

Financial counsellors are qualified professionals that can help you when you are in financial difficulty. They provide information, support and advocacy. They generally work in community organisations and their services are free, independent, non-judgemental and confidential. You can talk to a financial counsellor about these kinds of issues:

- You are in debt and not sure what to do
- You are not sure how to negotiate with creditors
- You need information about financial matters like taxation, Centrelink or Child Support
- You want to start a budget but need help or you want to talk through your budget with someone
- You just want to talk through the stresses of living on a low or restricted income

There are different types of services provided by the financial counsellors. At services like Care Inc. Financial Counselling Service staff can provide you with financial counselling information, casework and gambling financial counselling. Care's services are free for people on low to moderate incomes. People on higher incomes may access the information services but not casework or advocacy services.

Financial counselling services do not provide funds, vouchers or emergency relief.

Care Inc. Financial Counselling Service

Address: Level 4, CCG House
219 London Circuit
Canberra City, ACT 2601

Ph: 1800 007 007 or 02 6257 1788

Email: admin@carefcs.org

Website: www.carefcs.org

Opening hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm

After hour support: Drop-In service available on Wednesday night between 5.30pm and 7.30pm. Please arrive by 6pm to ensure you are seen. This service provides information and assistance with filling in forms but does not provide advocacy.

You can also leave a message on our afterhours message bank on 1800 007 007 or 6257 1788 and a financial counsellor will call you back.

If you are distressed about your financial situation after office hours contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Salvation Army's Moneycare Canberra

Address: Various locations across Canberra

<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/locations>

Phone: 1300 371 288

Website: <https://salvos.org.au/need-help/financial-assistance/financial-counselling/>

Please note that not all Moneycare services are full time and that due to demand for services there may be a waiting period before an appointment is available.

How can I sort out my debts?

Sorting out debts is something lots of us put off. If you can get started by looking through what you owe and who you owe it to, you can then make an action plan to tackle the debts before they get any bigger.

Warnings about schemes claiming to consolidate and refinance your debt

You may have heard about or seen on TV or on the internet companies or brokers that can help you get out of debt quickly, cheaply or without you having to do anything.

Many of these schemes may actually end up leaving you with more financial stress and debt. They will usually charge a big fee for the service too.

Remember to look out for the warning signs that a debt consolidation or refinance deal might be trouble*:

- What they advertise seems too good to be true
- They say they can help you no matter how desperate your financial situation is
- They tell you not to worry about reading the paperwork
- They ask you to sign blank documents or credit application forms that have false information in them
- They arrange a type of loan for you that you didn't want
- They do not explain fees, charges and/or repayments before you sign up

Before you sign up to anything get free financial counselling. They will help you make the best choices when dealing with your debts.

*Information sourced from [MoneySmart](#)

Creating a Recovery Plan

1. Make a checklist of your debts

Make a list of all the people or places you owe money to and how much you owe to each one.

Remember! Just because someone says you owe them money doesn't always mean that you do!

Sometimes a bill may be incorrect, or the debt is actually not legally yours.

Generally, if a debt is NOT in your name it's NOT your debt!

Always question any amount someone is claiming from you if you don't think it is correct or in your name. You don't want to be repaying a debt that you shouldn't have to!

- If a debt is in a joint name or you are not sure if you really owe the money claimed, it may be helpful to talk to a financial counsellor or free legal service.
- To make this easier it is a good idea to get a free copy of your credit file. Your credit file holds information on your credit history. It contains a list of the debts you owe and information about your repayment history.

You can get a free copy of your file by writing to Veda at:

Veda Public Access

Address: PO Box 964
North Sydney NSW 2059
Fax: (02) 9278 7333

For more information look at their website for more information:

<https://www.mcu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Veda-Personal-File-Request.pdf>

2. List all the different types of debts you owe

To help make it easier for you to make a list we have put together a list of the different types of debts that people can owe:

- **Housing**

Housing debt includes money owing on things like outstanding rental repayments, mortgage and property damage. You may be behind on repaying housing debts for many reasons either related to the violence you have or are experiencing or not.

If you have a mortgage lender talk with them directly and explain your circumstances. They may be able to help you with a hardship variation and repayment plan.

Contact ACT Housing if you are in public or community housing and you are struggling to pay rent. They may be able to help you sort out a rental payment system that better suits your financial situation.

If you are boarding or renting privately and don't pay your rent on time or as agreed with the landlord, you will incur a debt and may be threatened with eviction. Try to deal with this debt as soon as you can.

If you are on Centrelink, you may be able to use Centrepay to pay your private or public rent. This can help take the hassle out of making sure the rent is paid on time and in full.

- **Credit/Personal loans**

Credit/Personal loans include things like credit cards, mortgages and same-day loans. These types of debts have regular repayments that have to be paid on time and interest is charged on top of what you owe. If you cannot make these regular repayments on this type of debt you may be charged late fees on top of what you owe. If you are having trouble repaying your credit/personal loans debts you may be able to negotiate a hardship variation with the creditor.

Making the minimum repayment

If you only make the minimum repayment on a debt each payment period you will end up paying a lot more money than you borrowed. This is because of the interest, fees and charges which come with borrowing money.

Work out if you can afford to pay over the minimum payment. If you can you will pay off the debt quicker and save!

- **Utility – Electricity, Gas and Water bills**

Generally utility bills are due every three months. If you don't pay the full amount by the due date you will have an amount outstanding. This outstanding amount will be added to your next bill.

If you have an outstanding utility bill in your name there are a couple of actions you can take to avoid disconnection or impact on your credit rating.

If you can, firstly check if the amount owed is correct and that the debt is actually owed by you and not previous tenants that moved in before or after you.

If the debt is co-owned by you and the person using violence you may still be liable for the debt. If you have moved from the residence signed to the account, contact the provider and remove your name from the account so that future debts will not be in your name. If you did not give your consent to be put on the utility bill you should also contact your provider and explain your position.

If you are having trouble paying your old and new utility debts talk to the utility company first. They may help you to set up a payment plan or hardship variation.

If you can't reach an agreement with your utility company contact the Australia Capital Territory Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT) on 6207 7740. They can help you avoid disconnection through a Hardship Application. For more information online visit:

<https://www.acat.act.gov.au/case-types/energy-and-water-cases>

- **Health care or Medical Bills**

Healthcare or medical debts often happen because of unexpected illness or emergency. Big bills like ambulance fees or operations and treatment are daunting. If you know you're going to have any kind of surgery or medical treatment always ask for an estimate of costs and a payment plan before agreeing to the treatment if you can. Remember if you have a Centrelink Healthcare card medical treatment may be heavily discounted and your debt minimised or cleared.

- **Legal fees**

You may have outstanding legal fees. These can be very costly and mount up quickly. It is important to make sure you ask for a quote on costs before you go ahead with any legal assistance. If you have outstanding legal fees try negotiating a hardship variation with the legal service who you owe money to. You could also talk with a financial counsellor to work out a repayment strategy.

- **Debts to Family and friends**

Debts to family and friends can be some of the hardest to deal with because people may feel guilty or ashamed about borrowing from family and friends. You may also feel pressure to repay these ones before other debts. It's important to put them into your list of debts so you can include them in any plan of action.

- **Centrelink Debts**

A Centrelink debt may happen for a couple of reasons. If you do not declare and report on your income and assets truthfully, on time and correctly you may find yourself in debt. You need to let Centrelink know about *any money* that you receive from any source. This includes wages, interest on savings, gifts or inheritances, winnings or windfalls and any other income you receive from any source. If you are unsure about what to declare always check with Centrelink.

If you have a change in circumstances, like a new job, a break up or a new relationship, you need to let Centrelink know. Your payments may need to be adjusted. If you are overpaid by receiving a payment you're not entitled to you may end up having a debt. Centrelink can deduct repayments for these debts from your future Centrelink payments.

- **Tax debts**

Tax debts may occur if you don't report your income properly or if you are unable to pay tax on a business with your name on it. For information on dealing with a tax debt visit:

<https://www.ato.gov.au/General/Paying-the-ATO/Help-with-paying/>

Internet and Phone Debt

Internet and phone debt can happen if you don't pay your bill on time. If you cannot pay your bill on time or you have received a bill that you think is incorrect it is best to contact your provider as soon as you can. This will help protect your credit file and may stop you from being disconnected.

- **Fines**

Traffic fines like driving an unregistered vehicle, driving unlicensed, speeding or parking fines can be extremely costly. Acting quickly to make an arrangement to

pay fines can help make paying this debt easier. Visit the Access Canberra website page about paying your fine or extending your payment period: https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/answers/detail/a_id/1271/~/traffic-and-parking-infringements .

Overdue or late fines for borrowed items like video/DVD hire and library books can accumulate overtime and can be transferred to debt collectors to pursue. Try talking with the business or library who you owe money to early. This could help stop the debt getting bigger.

- **Memberships and subscriptions**

Memberships and subscriptions, such as Foxtel and gym memberships, if not paid regularly can create debt. Your service or membership may be suspended and there may be late fees.

3. Prioritise your debts

Arrange the debts you have listed. This means placing the most urgent ones at the top and the less urgent ones at the bottom. If a debt is making you stressed and stopping you and your family from having essentials like food and a roof over your head you may want to place it at the top of your list.

Not all debts are the same!

Debts can have different interest rates, payment dates, repayment processes and impacts on your credit file.

4. Do your budget.

Have a look over your budget to see what (if anything) you can afford to repay on each debt.

Working out and sticking to a strict budget can be tough and it might be helpful to get the support of a financial counsellor. They are experienced and have a good understanding of how difficult it can be to repay debts on a tight budget. They also help women leaving violence on a regular basis and will be able to help you to know what to do next.

5. Contact and negotiate with your creditors

Talking to your creditors may make paying back debts easier. If you can explain why you are having trouble repaying the debt it may be possible to work out a repayment plan that suits your needs.

It is best to talk with creditors as soon as you can. If you don't talk with them and let them know why you're not able to pay your debt they will most likely start a collection or legal process to recover the debt.

Financial institutions, like banks, have a responsibility to try and work with you to deal with your debts.

Before you contact any creditor by phone, in writing or in person get as much information as you can about your debt.

- Is the debt in your name? If you are unsure request a statement of the debt from the creditor.
- Is there anyone else responsible for the debt?
- Is the amount correct?
- If you can, have paperwork about the debt on hand. This includes statements or contracts
- How much can you afford to pay back and how long it will take you to pay the debt off

Pulling this information together and writing down what you want out of a negotiation can help settle some of the nerves you may be feeling.

When you contact a creditor always get the name, phone number and position of anyone you speak to about the debt. Check that the person you are talking to can assist you. If not, ask to speak to someone higher up in the company.

Stay calm and never lose your temper! If people are rude or aggressive with you end the call and seek assistance from a financial counsellor.

Be clear about what you want to achieve with any communication with your creditors.

6. Let the creditor know what you can afford

Tell them:

- How much your budgeting allows you to pay off your debt including the interest
- How long it will take you to pay off the debt
- When you can start making payments

Get the creditor to explore your options for repayment. This includes repayment arrangements, plans and hardship variation.

When you negotiate don't take 'no' as the only answer. Ask to speak to someone higher up. Show that you are flexible by offering workable solutions. If this does not work and an arrangement can't be agreed on contact a financial counsellor. Financial counsellors have experience in dealing with creditors and will be able to help you.

Don't ever agree to pay more than you know you can afford on a debt.

If a creditor agrees to accept your offer always ask the creditor to put any agreements, you make in writing and send you a copy. If they do not do this, write to them yourself and confirm the details of the arrangement.

Keep a record of all phone conversations, letters and discussions in a secure place. This will make it easier for you to show what was said or agreed to on a certain date.

7. Keep a track of your repayments

To keep track of your repayments, draw up a timeline which has the balance of the debt in one column and your planned repayment amount and date in another. This can be a great way to see how your debt will reduce over time.

Debt	Repayment	Date

8. Keep your creditors up to date

Remember to keep your creditors up to date. This will show that you are serious. Always tell them if you can't keep up with the repayments. Ask them what else may be done.

What if my creditors don't agree?

Sometimes it may be difficult to negotiate with creditors. Don't fear! There are a couple of actions you can take.

Contact a financial counsellor

A financial counsellor can help discuss with you ways to deal with a creditor who won't assist you. They can also work with you and the creditor to negotiate a repayment plan or hardship variation.

Apply using the National Credit Code

The National Consumer Credit Protection Act 2009 (NCCP Act) is the Australian law that governs consumer credit and is designed to protect consumers' interests. It includes The National Credit Code.

Under the National Credit Code a consumer can notify a bank of the fact that they are experiencing financial hardship and can't meet their repayment commitments under a credit contract.

In some circumstances it may be possible to obtain a new, more affordable repayment arrangement with the credit provider.

For more information about this legal protection you can talk with a financial counsellor.

Ask them to waive part or all of a debt

If you are facing extremely difficult financial circumstances or bankruptcy you may be able to negotiate with your creditors to waive part or all of the debt.

“Dealing with debt collectors can be stressful! There are laws to prevent them from making your life a misery. If a debt collector calls on you, or if you receive notice that you are being taken to court, get free legal advice about your options as soon as possible.”³

Free legal advice in the ACT:

ACT - Legal Aid ACT 1300 654 314

ACT - Consumer Law Centre of the ACT 02 6143 0044

Dipping into my Superannuation

You might be thinking about trying to access your super early to deal with debt or for other reasons. It is important to know that access to superannuation should always be considered very carefully as it is a buffer for retirement and once spent it is usually difficult to rebuild.

There are very restricted circumstances which let you access your superannuation before retirement age. Not all funds have the same early access rules and superannuation is never released for day to day expenses.

If you are experiencing financial difficulties, you may be able to access your superannuation if you meet the criteria for either Severe Financial Hardship or Specified Compassionate Grounds. Visit the Department of Human Services website for more information about early access to superannuation:

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/early-release-superannuation>

Consider discussing your circumstances with a financial counsellor before trying to access your superannuation. They can help you look at other options available.

³ <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/managing-your-money/managing-debts/dealing-with-debt-collectors>

What should I do if I feel like I have been mistreated by a creditor?

Make a complaint

Firstly talk to your financial institution's Internal Dispute Resolution section (IDR). Often disputes can be resolved at this level without further escalation of the matter. Be clear about what you want as a resolution and always keep notes of any conversations you have. If the dispute is resolved ask for confirmation of the result in writing for your records.

What if my complaint isn't resolved?

If the dispute isn't resolved directly with the financial institution, you can contact the relevant External Dispute Resolution Scheme (EDR).

Who to contact?

For financial, insurance or investment products or services complaints contact the Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA). The AFCA is an independent organisation that is funded to resolve disputes between consumers and member financial services providers. AFCA is a free service for consumers.

On 1 November 2018, The Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA) replaced the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS), the Credit and Investments Ombudsman (CIO) and the Superannuation Complaints Tribunal (SCT).

The AFCA cover the following financial services disputes:

- banking, credit and loans
- general insurance, including life insurance
- financial planning, investments, stock broking, managed funds and pooled superannuation trusts
- estate planning, estate management and trustee services

They also cover:

- credit unions, building societies and non-bank lenders
- mortgage and finance brokers
- financial planners
- investment managers
- debt services plus a wide range of other financial services and product providers

For more information visit <https://www.afca.org.au/> or phone 1800 931 678.

Other useful complaint schemes:

Ombudsmen Schemes

If you have a complaint about a commonwealth government department you can contact the **Commonwealth Ombudsman**. The Commonwealth Ombudsman's role is to safeguard the community in its dealings with Australian Government agencies.

Ph: 1300 362 072 Website: <http://www.ombudsman.gov.au>

The **ACT Ombudsman** investigates complaints made about administrative actions of ACT government agencies and public education providers.

Ph: 02 6276 3773 Website: <http://ombudsman.act.gov.au/>

The **Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman** (TIO) provides a free dispute resolution service for residential customers and small businesses that have a complaint about their telephone or internet service in Australia.

Phone: 1800 062 058 Website: <http://www.tio.com.au>

Energy & Water

If you have a complaint against a utility provider in the ACT, contact the **ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal** (ACAT) Energy and Water division.

Phone: 6207 1740 Website: <http://www.acat.act.gov.au>

*calls to complaint schemes with 1300 & 1800 numbers on mobiles are charged at mobile rates. If you are unable to stay on a phone talking to the agency, and you are ok to give them your phone number, ask the agency to call you back.

How can I manage my money on a tight budget?

Making a plan to manage your money after leaving prison may help ease some of your financial stresses and help you to better understand your financial position. Living in the ACT can be expensive for some things and cheaper for others! But depending on what you are buying, there are lots of places to get low cost goods in the ACT.

Managing on a tight budget can be stressful but there is support available. The first steps to managing your money may be easier if you can get some individual support. If you would like to talk to someone over the phone or in person about budgeting, there are Canberra based organisations which can give you free and confidential support. They can help you plan and stay on track with your budget.

Care Inc. Financial Counselling Service

Website: <http://www.carefcs.org/>
Address: Level 4, CCG House
219 London Circuit
Canberra City ACT 2601
Office hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm
Phone: (02) 6257 1788 or 1800 007 007
Email: admin@carefcs.org

Salvation Army's Moneycare, Canberra

The Salvation Army's Moneycare service provides free and confidential financial counselling for people facing financial difficulties or wanting to avoid financial difficulties in the future. They are able to help with a range of issues including budgeting, credit, debt and repossession.

Visit the website to find details about your local centre.

Website: <https://salvos.org.au/need-help/financial-assistance/financialcounselling/>
Phone: 1300 371 288

Below you will find information on managing your money and budgeting, as well as handy hints on keeping your expenses down.

Creating a budget

Budget your income based on money that is regularly coming in and out. This can help you manage the highs and lows. A budget is a plan that has information about your financial situation, like what money is coming in and what money is going out. A budget helps you to plan, keep track of and manage your spending and saving.

To make a budget:

1. On a budget sheet, piece of paper or on a computer start by writing down a list of what money you can count on getting pay period. This list or column is called "Income" or "Money in".
2. Next to the "Income" list write down what you spend each pay period. This column is called "Expenses" or "Money out". It will probably list things like food, household essentials, bills, petrol and any debt repayments due.
3. Add up both columns individually and write their totals at the bottom of each column.

4. Now minus the Expenses from the Income. This will tell you if you are overspending or whether you have money to save. Ideally, after taking the expenses away from your total income there is money left over.

Highlight areas where you could save. Even if you don't have money left over, there may be ways to reduce expenses or increase income. Making even small changes to balance your budget may give you a workable money plan.

There are ready-made budget sheets online to help you get started. For ready-made budget sheets you can:

- check out Care Financial Counselling Service Inc.'s Budget Sheet at <https://www.carefcs.org/tools-and-resources>
- visit the budgeting tool on the Child Support Agency website which allows you to work out your own budget of income and basic living costs at <https://processing.csa.gov.au/BudgetTool/Index.aspx>; or
- visit your local Centrelink Service Office and ask for a Fortnightly Savings Planner from their Financial Information Service or download the Planner from <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/subjects/manage-your-money/budget> .

Tips to help you stay on budget

Here are some handy hints and tips which may be able to help you cut costs and save:

- Only go to the shops once a week or once a fortnight.
- Shop quickly and only go to shops when you need to go.
- Don't shop when you're hungry.
- Make a list before you go shopping and stick to it.
- Look at catalogues from local supermarkets to check out where the best buys are each week.
- Try and shop without any children as they can make it hard to say no to things
- Don't use a trolley unless you really need to, because you'll fill it up.
- Fill up your basket with fruit and vegies, not packaged foods.
- Ask yourself: is an item on sale that much cheaper? Do I need it?
- Pay cash wherever possible so you are not tempted to use credit or go over your 'fee-free' transactions limit if you have one.
- Don't put groceries on credit cards because if you don't pay it off each month, you'll end up paying interest on food. You might even leave your cards at home when you visit the shops and only spend the cash you have on you.
- Look for specials, shop-a-dockets, coupons and use them.
- Buy in bulk with friends or family.

- Shop with a friend who is also on a budget - you can share tips, enjoy bargains and save together.
- If you often use retail therapy try to think of other ways to comfort yourself.

Where not to shop:

Shops like convenience stores and petrol stations are generally more expensive than supermarkets. Try to avoid shopping at these places. Even though they may be convenient or offer fuel deals more often than not they are costly.

Can I get discounts or help to make my utility bills cheaper?

1. Concession card discounts

If you have either a Pensioner Concession Card or Centrelink Health Care Card you may be eligible for a range of concessions. When you are connecting to a service ask them about available discounts. Registering your concession card early could be give you discounts on your bills.

You can also go online and check out the ACT Government Concessions page at www.assistance.act.gov.au for more information about concessions for ACT residents.

2. ACTsmart Household Energy Efficiency Program

The ACT Government Low Income Household Program provides low-income Australian Capital Territory households with a practical approach to help them reduce their energy and water use and save on energy and water bills.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is working with the ACT Government to deliver the program. Benefits of the program include;

- reduce your energy and water consumption
- save money
- improve the comfort of your home
- an energy-saving information kit
- a shower timer
- a thermometer
- draft proofing for your home

For more information contact The Society of St Vincent de Paul; 02 6234 7408 or email energyefficiency@svdp-cg.org.au

or phone:

- Belconnen Community Service on (02) 6264 0200
- Communities@Work on (02) 6126 9000 or (02) 6293 6500
- Northside Community Service on (02) 6257 2255
- The Society of St Vincent de Paul on (02) 6234 7424
- YWCA of Canberra on (02) 6173 7100

3. ActewAGL Enduring Support Scheme

The Enduring Support Scheme is for ACT and NSW residential customers who need assistance managing their energy and water accounts due to domestic or family violence. Support is provided in a confidential and secure environment and can be managed through an advocate or counsellor with your permission.

Financial support options include;

- flexible payment arrangements
- energy efficiency support
- eligibility for the Staying Connected program
- fee waivers
- discounted plans.

For more information about eligibility and access to the program call 1300 138 574 or you can apply online <https://forms.actewagl.com.au/forms/staying-connectedform.aspx>

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF!

Even on a really tight budget it's important to try and leave some money for yourself. 'Quality of life' means taking care of the essentials first but also allowing yourself some things that make you feel good and that you enjoy!

What if I need to borrow money or access credit?

Before you borrow money the first thing to think about is whether you can afford it.

The best way to check out what will be affordable for you is to do a budget and see what's left over after your other expenses. It doesn't matter whether you want to borrow for a small or larger item, like a car or you are borrowing from the No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS), you still need to know what you can afford.

What are the alternatives to borrowing?

There may be alternatives to the stress and expense that comes with borrowing money. You might want to think about:

- **The purpose of the expense**

If the purpose is not essential it may be better and more affordable in the long term to save the entire or part of the cost rather than getting into debt. Having a loan that covers the whole expense means that you will end up paying more than the original price because of interest, fees and charges.

- **Lay-by**

A lay-by can be a more affordable way to purchase something without entering into debt. Be sure to check out the fees and charges before you enter into a lay-by!

- **Shopping around**

Allow yourself time to shop around for the best deal. Prices and offers can vary from store to store.

What do I need to know?

Ok, so you've done your budget and now you want to get the best deal for your money! Below are some of the most important things to consider and know when borrowing money:

- **Always borrow from a licensed credit provider**

Make sure you are borrowing money from a licensed credit provider. If a credit provider is not licensed you will not have the same legal protection or rights as you would if they were. To check whether a credit provider is licensed see:

ASIC's Professional Register

<https://connectonline.asic.gov.au/RegistrySearch/faces/landing/ProfessionalRegister>

or phone ASIC's info line on 1300 300 630.

- **Interest, fees and charges**

Interest, fees and charges can really hurt financially! Before you agree to borrow money, be sure to ask the creditor or person lending the money:

- What the interest rate is on top of the amount you are borrowing?
- What do the interest rates mean per payment?
- Will you be required to pay monthly or fortnightly? This can make a difference to your repayment period.
- What the fees or charges for the loan are? This includes both regular ongoing fees and one-off fees.
- If you miss a payment or are late with a payment what the penalty or charge is.
- For an information or fact sheet which details any fees or charges associated with borrowing money from them.

A financial counsellor can help you decide if the interest rates, fees and charges of a credit option suit your borrowing needs and financial situation best.

- **Read over everything and make sure you understand before you sign**

Collect the documents you need for the application and processing of your loan request. It's better to have these ready and not have to keep going back and forth to the lender because you haven't got everything you need.

Get a copy of the loan contract, agreement and any insurance that you are being offered to take away and have a look at *before* you sign anything. Contracts can be difficult to read and getting some help with this from a financial counsellor or consumer credit solicitor can be useful.

Signing a contract

A contract is a binding legal agreement between the debtor(s) (the person/people borrowing the money) and creditor(s) (the person/organisation lending the money). It generally details the terms and conditions of a loan. This means what each party must or mustn't do. This usually includes things like the details of both debtor and creditor, the amount of money lent, the repayment period and any fees or charges.

As a legally binding agreement or document you are usually required to follow the terms and conditions of the contract you have made with your creditor.

Remember to always read any contract carefully and in full. This includes the fine print or underwriting. Contracts are often hard to understand and it might be helpful to see a financial counsellor or a consumer credit solicitor. Always ask questions if you need to.

Don't sign a contract until you understand and agree with all the terms and conditions.

A contract can be:

In writing

A contract may be in a written document which requires your signature. Not all contracts are in writing. This form can be useful because it is a written record of your loan arrangement.

When you put your signature on a contract it means you agree to the terms and conditions of the contract you have signed. If you don't agree to what is written, don't sign!

Oral

An oral contract happens when you agree verbally to purchase goods or services. For example if you are having your car repaired and the mechanic tells you (in person or over the phone) that your car needs \$100 worth of repairs and you agree to have the repairs done. Even though you haven't signed anything, you may still be required to pay the amount discussed.

If you are agreeing verbally to something it is important to always make sure you ask how much it will cost and ask for a written quote before you agree. Having a quote in writing will help both parties to understand their responsibilities.

Ticking an online form

Today many people purchase goods and services via the internet through sites like eBay and Amazon. If you purchase goods or services via the internet you will be asked to tick a box which asks if you agree to the terms and conditions. Make sure you understand the terms and conditions before you tick this box and proceed with your purchase.

If you are purchasing goods or services overseas and you have an issue with the supplier remember Australia's consumer protection laws do not apply in other countries.

- **Know how much you want to borrow and don't be talked into taking out more than this amount**

- **Know your rights & responsibilities**

Both you (the borrower) and the credit provider (the lender) have certain rights and responsibilities. A creditor must provide you with either a credit guide or a written notice containing information about their licence number, fees and also details of your right to make a complaint.

Be sure to get a credit guide or written notice before you go ahead with any credit or loan.

Hints, tips and warnings on credit options

Beware of these types of credit!

Some forms of borrowing money are expensive and can be misleading. Below you will find a list of credit options which should be wary of:

- **Credit cards** - Credit cards can be really expensive because they often have a high interest rate plus fees. This means that you will pay more than the amount you spend. Unless you can pay the full amount off each month and NOT leave anything owing, you will end up paying interest on all your card purchases.

If you are thinking about getting a credit card always look for a card with the lowest interest and longest repayment 'window' or period.

Handy hint!

Remember to always look at your statements, try to avoid cash advances and repay more than the minimum repayment amount in the interest-free period.

- **Store cards** - Store cards are credit cards offered by large retail stores. Interest rates for these cards are often much higher than other credit cards. This means if you don't pay them off quickly you will end up paying much more money than what you spent.

Sometimes retailers may send you a card even when you haven't requested it. It can be tempting to use this but remember that interest begins to build up as soon as you use the card. This interest rate is usually high. Stores or financial institutions should not send you a card unless you have requested it.

Before you sign up for a store card be sure to compare other forms of borrowing.
- **'Interest free' deals** - 'Interest-free' deals are often advertised at furniture or appliance stores. 'Interest free' is not the same as a 'no Interest loan' offered by a community organisation.

'Interest free' contracts may have regular payments due or a period without any payments. If you miss a required payment or don't pay in full when the period without payments expires you may end up paying a lot in interest, fees and charges.
- **Pay-day, Same day or Fast-cash loans** - These types of loans loan people cash very quickly in small amounts. They are often targeted at people on low incomes who need to get cash quickly and do not think they can get money from other credit providers. They tend to have high fees and charges which

end up being the same as high interest rates. It can be very difficult to pay back this type of credit quickly. If you don't make the exact payments as they are due you will be charged fees that push up the cost of the repayments.

There are options such as *No interest Loans, Step Up Loans and Centrelink Advances* that may be a better and safer option for borrowing money.

If you need help and are considering a Pay-day, Same day or Fast-cash loan contact a free financial counsellor to discuss your options before you apply.

- **Loan sharks** - A loan shark is like a Pay-day, Same day or Fast-cash loan lender that offers high interest rate loans. They normally target people on low incomes who feel they can't access credit any other way. A loan shark can also be an individual who offers money and uses inappropriate and threatening methods to get it back from you. Don't borrow from anyone who says they can just lend you money. It is always best to go to a licensed lender.

- **Rent to Buy** - Stores that sell things like household goods and entertainment systems often offer 'rent to buy' deals. They tend to show you a weekly 'rental figure' or repayment and a nominal final payment. This deal can look pretty good at first but beware!

If you add up the number of weekly repayments plus the final payment, you will see that the final cost will be several times the actual price of the goods you are buying. To save a lot of money it is better to buy outright or consider a No Interest Loan Scheme instead.

- **Pawn Brokers** - Pawn brokers lend small loans in exchange for goods. When the loan is repaid in full along with any interest, charges or fees the goods are returned to you. If you cannot repay the loan the goods you pawned will be put on sale.

Be aware that the loan you get from pawning goods is usually less than the value of the goods themselves. If you add the interest and fees often charged by pawnbrokers the deal you are getting may actually not be very good. This is even true if you pawn goods in exchange for money without aiming to get the goods back.

Remember though, once you pawn something it can be very hard to get it back. This is because the repayments, interest and charges can be difficult to pay back in the repayment period.

- **Borrowing and family, friends and community members** - Before you borrow from family or friends think carefully about:
 - The amount of money you want to borrow
 - The way you will repay the debt

- The length of time it will take to repay the debt
- What will happen if it is hard to pay the debt back

It is important to think about how borrowing money from family and friends may affect your relationships. If for some reason you can't pay your debt back it can place stress on the relationship.

If you want to borrow money from your family or friends it is a good idea to set up a repayment plan together. Even if you are confident you can pay the debt back quickly, be sure to factor in a plan if you are finding it hard to make repayments. It is always best to talk and plan before things may get out of control.

It may be that family or friends ask you or put pressure on you to borrow money for them. This might be because they can't get a loan in their name for some reason.

Remember if you take out a loan in your name for someone else, you will be responsible for the repayments even if the other person says they will pay it!

- **Credit deals that seem too good to be true** - If you come across a credit deal that seems to be too good to be true, it probably is! There are lots of different ways that people can be scammed so it's best to be alert to anything that seems a bit unusual. Scams about credit can include receiving emails or calls about winning the lottery, inheriting a fortune or the early release of your superannuation if you reveal personal information. The golden rule is DON'T give your details to other people and always be on the lookout for anything that seems too good to be true.

Check out the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) Scam Watch website at www.scamwatch.gov.au. It has some great information about how to avoid scams and how to report one. There is also a handy list of Golden Rules which will help you to protect yourself from scams at <http://www.scamwatch.gov.au/content/index.phtml/tag/howtoprotectyourselves>.

Safer ways to borrow money

- **No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)** - No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS) are offered to people and families on low incomes by community organisations. They can be used to purchase things like household goods and car repairs. Care Financial Counselling. offers a NILS program in the ACT. They have helped lots of people and families buy the things they need without the stress of added interest.

The maximum amount you can borrow is \$1500. If the item you want costs more than \$1500, you will need to have saved up the balance required before applying for the loan. This means that if you want to buy whitegoods for \$2000 you will need to save up the extra \$500 to be able to apply for the \$1500 offered by the NILS.

To be eligible you must:

- Live in the ACT and surrounding district
- Hold a Centrelink Pension or Health Care Card or worker on a low income
- Have the capacity to repay the loan within 12-18 months
- Have stable accommodation

Loans are paid back fortnightly through Centrepay or by Deposit Book. For more information Contact:

Care Inc. Financial Counselling

Address: Level 4, CCG House
219 London Circuit
Canberra City

Office hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm

Phone: (02) 6257 1788

Email: admin@carefcs.org

Website: www.carefcs.org.au

- **StepUP Loans** - StepUP loans are for individuals or families that have a current Centrelink Concession Card or are receiving [Family Tax Benefit Part A](#). Individuals or families are also required to have lived at their current address for more than three months.

StepUP offers loans of between \$800 and \$3000 for personal or household purposes such as:

- Household Items including fridges, washing machines, and furniture
- Cars
- Computers
- Medical and Dental expenses
- House repairs
- Car repairs

Interest is charged at a fixed low rate, and loans can be repaid over three years. No fees apply. This loan is provided by National Australia Bank and is

subject to NAB's credit assessment. Terms and conditions apply. For more information and to check your eligibility contact:

BCS Southern Region Office

Address: 14 Wormald Street, Symonston ACT 2609

Phone: (02) 6195 3168

- **Centrelink Advances** - Sometimes you may be able to negotiate an advance on your Centrelink payment. How much you can get will depend on the payment you receive and the purpose of the advance. You will need to pay this advance off and can talk about repayment options with Centrelink. Contact Centrelink for more information:

Online: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/topics/advance-payment>

By phone: 136 240

Calls from your home phone to a 13 number from anywhere in Australia are the cost of a local call. Local call charges may vary depending upon the telephone service provider, and mobiles may incur a higher charge.

In person: Visit your local Centrelink Service Centre

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/contact-us/find-us>

- **Matched savings plans** - Matched savings plans help families on lower incomes to build saving habits and assets. The plan will match the amount you save up to a certain limit. For example, if you save \$465 the matched savings plan provider will give you \$465. The money the plan gives you is generally for educational support.

In the ACT, the Smith Family runs a matched savings plan called the SaverPlus program. Participants who are eligible for the program make regular deposits towards a savings goal over a 10 month period. At the same time they attend workshops to build their financial management skills. When participants reach their savings goal, the ANZ bank matches the amount - up to \$500. This money is to be put towards education costs like uniforms, text books, laptops, sports equipment, music tuition, TAFE or apprenticeship costs and much more.

You may be eligible for the program if you:

- hold a Centrelink Health Care Card or Pensioner Concession Card
- are at least 18 years old
- have a regular income from work (you or your partner) including casual, part-time, full-time or seasonal employment
- have a child at school or attend vocational education yourself

To learn more about the program and to apply contact:

The Smith Family, Saver Plus

Apply online: www.bsl.org.au

Phone: 1300 610 355

Email: saverplus@bsl.org.au

- **Micro-Credit** - If you have a business idea or are in business you may be eligible for the ACT Women's Microcredit Program. This program offers small amounts of funding up to \$3,000 for women wanting to start their own business. You must be on a low income or hold a Centrelink concession card and show that you can repay any loan granted. For more information contact:

Brilliant Idea program, Lighthouse Business Innovation Centre

Address: 17/9 Beaconsfield Street

Fyshwick ACT 2609

Ph: 02 6163 8300

Website: <https://www.lighthouseinnovation.com.au>

Where can I get free advice on what to choose?

Care Inc. Financial Counselling Service

Address: Level 4, CCG House
219 London Circuit
Canberra City, ACT 2601

Ph: 1800 007 007 or 02- 6257 1788

Email: admin@carefcs.org.au

Website: www.carefcs.org

Opening hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm

If you are distressed about your financial situation after office hours contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Salvation Army's Moneycare, Canberra

The Salvation Army's Moneycare service provides free and confidential financial counselling for people facing financial difficulties or wanting to avoid financial difficulties in the future. They are able to help with a range of issues including budgeting, credit, debt and repossession. Phone your local centre for an appointment.

Website: <https://salvos.org.au/need-help/financial-assistance/financial-counselling/>

Phone: 1300 371 288

MoneySmart is a website created by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission. It is full of handy hints, tips and tools on how to manage your money.

For credit and borrowing information visit:

<https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/borrowing-and-credit>

More information?

MoneySmart is a website created by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission. It is full of handy hints, tips and tools on how to manage your money.

Visit: <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/>

What if I can't afford to pay my utility bill(s)?

If you are having trouble paying your bills there are a couple of things you can do. Don't ignore the problem! Dealing with a debt quickly is likely to have a better outcome on your budget and stress levels.

Contact the service provider or company which gave you the bill. Ask them about **hardship policies and programs**.

Services, like utilities, are required to have policies and programs in place to assist you if you're experiencing financial hardship. They should listen to your circumstances and try and work with you.

The Australian energy regulator's website has lots of information about hardship which may be able to help you. Check out <https://www.aer.gov.au/consumers/my-energy-bill/having-trouble-paying-your-energy-bills>

ActewAGL

Many people in the ACT and region have their utilities supplied by ActewAGL. Their hardship program is called Staying Connected. Their website details how they may assist you with individual support to help you get back on track. See how they may be able to assist you at <https://www.actewagl.com.au/en/support-and-advice/help-with-your-bill/financial-hardship-programs>

Telstra vouchers: Access for everyone program

If you are experiencing financial difficulty and are having problems paying your Telstra bill you could be eligible for the Telstra's Access for Everyone Program.

The Access for Everyone program was designed to assist people on a low income, or facing financial hardship, maintain telecommunications access.

You will find information about this and other Telstra assistance at:

<https://www.telstra.com.au/aboutus/community-environment/community-programs/access-for-everyone>

If you can't reach an agreement:

If you can't reach an agreement with your utility about a bill, the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal may be able to assist you to avoid disconnection. You can start an ACAT *hardship assistance* application by ringing 6207 7740 and talking to staff. You could also check out

<https://www.acat.act.gov.au/case-types/energy-and-water-cases>

Get the help of a free financial counsellor. A financial counsellor can help you to organise a repayment strategy or hardship policy with the service provider. They can also support you with information and advice on budgeting for bills. Contact:

Care Inc. Financial Counselling Service

Website: <http://www.carefcs.org/>

Address: Level 4, CCG House
219 London Circuit
Canberra City, ACT 2601

Office hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm

Phone: (02) 6257 1788

Email: admin@carefcs.org

What financial support might I be eligible for?

The Australian government – through Centrelink - offers a range of financial support, both ongoing and one-off. Some of these payments are specifically for older people or people in financial hardship.

Eligibility for Centrelink payments

Centrelink will consider if you are eligible for a range of payments and services such as income support payments, crisis payments and exemptions from seeking employment or pensions based on your personal situation.

Depending on your circumstances you may be eligible for the following payments:

- Crisis Payment – This is a one-off payment to help people in difficult or extreme circumstances who are experiencing financial hardship. **In order to be eligible for the crisis payment you must submit your claim within 7 days after the event that led you to claim.** This payment can either be paid into your bank account or given to you through an Electronic Benefit Transfer card which can be can only be used once and can be used at most ATMs.
- Special Benefit – This helps if you are in severe financial hardship because of reasons outside your control and you cannot receive any other income support payment or benefit.
- If you already receive a Centrelink payment, you may be able to receive an advance lump-sum payment from your existing income support payment.
- JobSeeker Payment
- Age Pension
- Rent Assistance
- Concession and health care cards - These cards can help you with costs like medical, transport and household bills.

Discuss your circumstances with a Social Worker or Centrelink officer. They will help you get the payment that best suits your and your family's needs. You can contact Centrelink by:

- Calling **132 850** and ask to speak to a social worker.
- Visiting a Centrelink Service Centre.

For locations visit: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/contact-us/find-us>

- Going online for more information
<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/subjects/crisis-and-special-help>

There are other payments and supplements available as well. For instance, the Pension Loans Scheme may help you if your capital is tied up in assets and you need more income to live on. The Pension Loans Scheme is a voluntary arrangement that provides support in the form of a loan for either a short time or an indefinite period.

Access to Financial Information Service

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/financial-information-service>

You can attend a free Financial Information Service (FIS) seminar to help with your retirement planning. FIS seminars provide information about how to prepare for retirement, understanding your pension and living in retirement.

Call **132 300** to speak to a FIS officer. If possible, your questions will be answered over the phone. If there are complex issues to be discussed, the FIS officer may offer to arrange an appointment for you.

Access to social workers

Centrelink employs social workers who are experienced in helping women who are thinking about leaving, have left or are rebuilding their lives after violence. Social workers are located in service centres and on the phone to help people experiencing a crisis, have no support or are unsure how to access the right assistance.

Their social workers offer private and confidential interviews for counselling and support. They can help you work out your options including assessing your payments and exemptions to some requirements. They can also help you access other support services in the community.

To speak to a Centrelink social worker call **131 202**.

How long will I have to wait for my Centrelink support payment once my application is approved?

You will need to have a current bank account to receive ongoing Centrelink Payments. You can find out more about bank accounts by looking at the “Opening a bank account” section. Once your bank account has been organised, Centrelink can put your payments through an Electronic Bank Transfer (EBT) directly into your account.

Normally, payments take a few days to enter your bank account. This waiting time depends on your bank and the date and time of payment processing.

Centrelink may also be able to put a payment straight into your account with a real time payment. This option will be helpful if you need to access a payment quickly.

It is essential that you tell Centrelink if your account is overdrawn. If your account is overdrawn your payment will be affected because your bank will automatically deduct overdrawn money and fees.

Centrelink Appointments

As a requirement of receiving Centrelink support payments you may need to attend appointments which are necessary to assess your eligibility and circumstances. ***You can bring a family member or a friend to your appointment.***

Try to always attend any appointments that have been organised by Centrelink. If you can, gather together and bring all information and documentation that they might need or have asked you for.

If you cannot attend an appointment always try to notify Centrelink in advance by phone or in person at a Centrelink Service Centre. They will help reschedule a new appointment to meet your needs.

Reporting to Centrelink

If you receive a payment from Centrelink you will need to report any income you receive in addition to that payment. Remember if you do not report to Centrelink as required you will not receive a payment! Always report your income accurately, honestly and on your reporting date before 5pm. This will help make any dealings you have with Centrelink easier and make sure that your payments are regular.

Also remember that you need to report even if you have no income earned or circumstance changes. If you have had a change of circumstances, like you have moved, your phone number has changed or you have started a job, you will need to let Centrelink know as soon as possible.

You can report your income and any change of circumstances through:

- The internet - You will need to register for Centrelink's online services by visiting: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/topics/register-online-account/30986>
- By mobile – You can download Centrelink's Express Plus mobile app on your mobile device from the [App Store](#) and [Google Play™](#).
- By phone – You can advise Centrelink on 133 276 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). ***Remember that calls from your home phone to a 13 number from anywhere in Australia are the cost of a local call.*** Local call charges may vary depending upon the telephone service provider, and mobiles may incur a higher charge.

- In person - Visit your local Centrelink Service Centre and talk to a Centrelink Officer.

Centrepay

If you receive a regular Centrelink payment, like the Age Pension, you may be able to pay your bills through Centrepay. This is a free service which will deduct and pay the bills you have nominated out of your regular payment before it is paid to you.

Other entitlements for Pensioners and seniors

ACT Seniors Card

If you are over 60 years and are a permanent resident of the ACT and not working in paid employment for more than 20 hours a week you may be eligible for an ACT Seniors Card. An ACT Seniors card can give you discounts to business throughout the ACT and some government services. Every two years available discounts are printed in the Seniors Card Directory. This is downloadable from <https://www.actseniorscard.org.au/index.php/act-seniors-card-discount-directory> or you can visit the locations below to obtain a copy.

Your application form and identification will need to be witnessed by shopfront, library or COTA staff.

To check eligibility and to apply you need to get an application form from one of the following locations:

- **ACT Government shopfronts/Access Canberra**

Belconnen Shopfront

Swanson Plaza, Swanson Court

Belconnen ACT 2616

Opening hours: Monday to Friday - 9am to 5pm

Dickson Shopfront

Ground floor, Dickson Motor Registry, 13 - 15 Challis Street

Dickson ACT 2602

Opening hours: Monday to Friday - 8:15am to 5:00pm

Tuggeranong Shopfront

Homeworld Shopping Centre, Scollay Street

Tuggeranong ACT 2900

Opening hours: Monday to Friday - 9am to 5pm

Woden Shopfront

Ground floor, Woden Library, Corner of Furzer and Corinna Street

Woden ACT 2606

Opening hours: Monday to Friday - 9am to 5pm

For more information phone COTA on 02 6282 3777.

ACT Public Libraries

Belconnen Library, 12 Chandler Street, Belconnen ACT 2617

Civic Library

Civic Square, London Circuit, Canberra City ACT 2600

Dickson Library

Dickson Shops (off Antill Street), Dickson ACT 2602

Erindale Library

McBryde Crescent, Wanniasa ACT 2903

Gungahlin Library

Corner of Hibberson and Gozzard streets, Gungahlin ACT 2912

Kingston Library

52 Giles Street, Kingston ACT 2604

Kippax Library

Hardwick Crescent, Holt ACT 2615

Tuggeranong Library

Cowlishaw Street, Tuggeranong ACT 2900

Woden Library

Corinna Street, Phillip ACT 2606

For more information and to check for opening times see
<https://www.library.act.gov.au/find-us> or phone 6205 9000.

- **Council on the Ageing ACT Office**

Hughes Community Centre, Wisdom Street Hughes ACT

Tel: 02 6282 3777

Email: contact@cotaact.org.au

Website: <https://www.cotaact.org.au/>

If you need help with financial support, food, or money there are local ACT support services which can help you with essential everyday items.

What assistance is available if I need financial support?

ACT services may give out food parcels, cheaper groceries, food vouchers and cheap or free meals, clothing and low-cost household goods and furniture. There are other services who may assist with vouchers things like petrol.

Be aware that most services will not hand out cash.

Some services are drop in but others are not. If you can, it is best to call ahead to make an appointment and to check availability. By contacting these services, you will also be put in touch with other services which will help you if you need it. It is important to remember that these support services have little funding and may only be able to offer certain kinds of support at certain times. If you cannot get support from one service always ask to be referred to another service.

When visiting a support service, it is important to bring valid identification and your Centrelink Healthcare card if you have one.

Services that give support include major charities like [The Salvation Army](#) and [St. Vincent's de Paul Society](#) and community organisations and centres like [Communities@Work](#). Churches and op-shops are also good places to find support and information.

ACT Community Directory also has the following lists to help you access free meals and emergency relief across Canberra.

Website: <https://vc-act.mycommunitydirectory.com.au/>

Location: Room G.02, Griffin Centre, Genge St, Canberra City

Opening hours - Mon, Tue, Thur, Fri: 10am-4pm

Wed: 10am-1pm

Phone: 02 6248 7988

Check out Volunteering ACT's guide to free meals and emergency relief services

<https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Free-Meal-Emergency-Relief-and-Accommodation-Guide.pdf>

What low cost food assistance can I access if I need to?

If you are having trouble making ends meet there are a range of ACT support services that can help you. Food assistance centres across Canberra offer free or low cost food and everyday items, like washing powder and toilet paper, to individuals and families who are experiencing disadvantage.

Canberra food co-ops/pantries are for those struggling to balance their budgets or those with a genuine financial need. These services are limited and they may not be

available all the time because they mainly rely on donations and volunteers. It is a good idea to ring ahead, if you can, to check opening times and eligibility.

For a list of Canberra Food Co-ops/Pantries see Volunteering ACT's service guide:

<https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Free-Meal-Emergency-Relief-and-Accommodation-Guide.pdf>

Tips to help you stay on budget

Sticking to a tight budget can be tricky. Here are some handy hints and tips which may be able to help you cut costs and save:

- Only go to the shops once a week or once a fortnight
- If you often use retail therapy try to think of other ways to comfort yourself.
- Shop quickly and only go to shops you need to go to
- Don't shop when you're hungry
- Shop with a friend who is also on a budget. You can share tips, enjoy bargains and save together.
- Make a list before you go shopping and stick to it
- Try and shop without any children as they can make it hard to say no to things
- Don't use a trolley unless you really need to, because you'll fill it up
- Fill up your basket with fruit and vegies, not packaged foods
- Look at catalogues from local supermarkets to check out where the best buys are each week
- Ask yourself: is an item on sale that much cheaper?
- Pay cash wherever possible so you are not tempted to use credit or go over your 'fee-free' transactions limit if you have one. You might even leave your cards at home when you visit the shops and only spend the cash you have on you.
- Look for specials, shop-a-dockets, coupons and use them
- Don't put groceries on credit cards because if you don't pay it off each month, you'll end up paying interest on food
- Buy in bulk with friends or family

Where not to shop:

Shops like convenience stores and petrol stations are generally more expensive than supermarkets. Try to avoid shopping at these places. Even though they may be convenient or offer fuel deals more often than not they are costly.

Clothing and Furniture

Local op-shops or second hand store sell recycled goods like clothing, kitchenware and furniture. These shops include Salvos, Vinnies, Lifeline and YWCA Y's Buys. There are great bargains here and you could find one! Stores like Big-W, Kmart and Target also sell clothing and bedding at low prices.

No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)

You may also be interested in the **No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)** which you can use to help purchase household goods, like whitegoods and furniture. No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS) are offered to people and families on low incomes by community organisations. They can be used to purchase things like household goods and car repairs.

Care Financial Counselling Service Inc. offers a NILS program in the ACT. They have helped lots of people buy the things they need without the stress of added interest.

The maximum amount you can borrow is \$1500. If the item you want costs more than \$1500, you will need to have saved up the balance required before applying for the loan. This means that if you want to buy whitegoods for \$2000 you will need to save up the extra \$500 to be able to apply for the \$1500 offered by the NILS.

To be eligible you must:

- Live in the ACT and surrounding district
- Hold a Centrelink Pension or Health Care Card or worker on a low income
- Have the capacity to repay the loan within 12-18 months
- Have stable accommodation

Loans are paid back fortnightly through Centrepay or by Deposit Book.

For more information contact Care Inc. Financial Counselling

Website:	www.carefcs.org.au
Address:	Level 4, CCG House 219 London Circuit, Canberra City
Office hours:	Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm
Phone:	(02) 6257 1788
Email:	admin@carefcs.org

What affordable health services can I access?

Access to affordable and timely health care is a major issue for many women experiencing or having experienced domestic violence.

If you are worried about this and are living on a tight budget, there are ways to access low cost or free health services in Canberra. Using these services can help ease your budget worries whilst improving your health and wellbeing. Some of these services have a lot of experience working with women and children who have experienced domestic violence.

Free healthcare

The ACT is home to a number of free and low cost health services. Below is a list of the main services which may be able to help you and your children. Services will also be able to refer you to other services and specialists to suit your needs.

ACT Women's Health Service

The ACT Women's Health service is run by women for women. This is a free service which sees women who have significant difficulty in accessing health services. They have experience with and understand some of the difficulties you may be facing at this time and give priority to women in your position, because they regularly treat women who have experienced domestic violence; and who are financially disadvantaged. They offer nursing, medical and counselling appointments, and will give you short term medical support including and help you find a regular GP that suits your needs.

The Women's Health Service is centrally located in Civic at Level 1, 1 Moore Street. Outreach counselling and women's health clinics are also provided in Gungahlin, Belconnen, Phillip, and Tuggeranong.

Civic opening hours:	8:30am – 4:45pm Monday to Friday (Closed public holidays and between Christmas and the first working day in the New Year.)
Phone:	(02) 5124 1787

Canberra Hospital - Walk in Centre

The Walk-in Centres in Belconnen and Tuggeranong provide an alternative for fast access to free health advice and one-off treatment for minor illnesses and injuries. give free one-off medical advice and treatment for people with minor illness and injury. You can just drop in because you do not need to have an appointment.

Opening hours: 7.30am to 10pm daily every day of the year, including Christmas Day and New Year's Day

Addresses: **Dickson Walk-in Centre**

Dickson Community Health Centre

111 Dickson Place, Dickson

Gungahlin Walk-in Centre

1/57 Ernest Cavanagh Street, Gungahlin

Weston Creek Walk-in Centre

24 Parkinson Street, Weston

Belconnen Walk-in Centre

Belconnen Community Health Centre,

cnr Lathlain and Cohen Streets, Belconnen

Tuggeranong Walk-in Centre

Tuggeranong Community Health Centre

Cnr Anketell And Pitman Streets, Tuggeranong

Website: <http://health.act.gov.au/walk-in-centre/home/>

Bulk Billing doctors

Bulk billing is when a doctor bills Medicare directly for the full payment for their service. Bulk billing means you should not be charged any additional costs such as a booking or administration fee.

A patient account is when a doctor charges you directly in full. After you have paid you can then claim a portion of this cost with Medicare.

So to save money, look for doctors in your area who may bulk bill.

Things to remember:

- If you are running late or cannot make an appointment call the service.
- Always bring your Medicare card and Centrelink Concession cards

- Whenever and wherever you go to see a doctor or other health care professional always bring your Medicare Card and any Centrelink Concession card you hold. By showing these cards you may be able to get free or significant discounts on health services.
- When you make an appointment with any health care service always ask:
 - How much will it cost? How much of a co-payment will I have to pay?
 - Do you bulk bill and who do you do this for? Some health services only bulk bill for concession card holders, like seniors.
 - What Centrelink Concession card do I need for a discount?
 - If my appointment is longer, will I be charged more?
- If you have moved house **remember to get any correspondence from the healthcare provider sent to your new address.**

ACT Community Health Intake

Community Health Intake is a central access point for advice and referral to a range of specialist and rehabilitative services, like physiotherapy, maternity care and chronic disease management. Many of the services available through this have eligibility criteria and will require a referral from a GP.

For more information phone:

Phone: 6207 9977
8am-5pm, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday
8am-3:30pm Wednesday

Canberra Sexual Health Centre

The Canberra Sexual Health Centre is a free service that offers testing for and treatment of sexually transmissible infections. They are a specialist clinic, which seek to provide confidential and high quality professional and non-judgemental care. They provide access to the latest information, advice and treatments.

Phone: 02 5124 2184

Opening hours: 9am - 4pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday
12.30pm - 4.30pm Wednesday

Address: Building 5 (North Wing)
5 Gilmore Crescent
Canberra Hospital, Garran ACT

Phone: (02) 6244 2184

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service (AHS) is a free primary health service run by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. To access this service you will need to be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. They provide medical services like women and children specific services, immunisations, health checks and dental.

Opening hours: 9am – 4:30pm Monday to Friday
Address: 63 Boolimba Crescent
Narrabundah ACT 2604
Phone: (02) 6284 6222

ACT Health Alcohol and Drug Services

The Health Directorate gives information, advice, referral, intake, assessment and support twenty-four hours a day. They help individuals and their family and friends with drug and alcohol problems.

Phone: 24 Hour Helpline (02) 6207 9977
Address: Building 7, Palmer Street, The Canberra Hospital
Level 1, 1 Moore Street, Canberra City

Low cost health services

National Health Coop

The National Health Cooperative Ltd provides affordable and accessible medical and health services to the Canberra community.

You can become a member by paying a low annual membership fee. As a member you will receive benefits such as bulk billing where possible. It is a not-for-profit organisation which means that your membership fees go into supporting the Cooperative.

For more information contact the following Cooperative centres:

National Health Coop ANU

Opening hours: 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday
9:00am-2:00pm Saturday
Address: L2, Building 156
Joplin Lane, Acton ACT 2601
Phone: (02) 6178 0400
Website: www.nhc.coop/locations/anu

National Health Co-op Coombs

Opening hours: 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday
Address: 110 Woodberry Ave
Coombs, ACT 2611
Phone: (02) 6178 0400
Website: www.nhc.coop/locations/coombs

National Health Co-op Chisholm

Opening hours: 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday
9am -2pm Saturday
Address: 26 Benham Street, Chisholm ACT 2905
Phone: (02) 6178 0400
Website: www.nhc.coop/locations/chisholm

National Health Co-op Belconnen

Opening hours: 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday
Address: 1/30 Totterdell Street, Belconnen ACT 2616
Phone: (02) 6178 0400
Website : www.nhc.coop/locations/belconnen

National Health Co-op Kippax

Opening hours: 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday
Address: Kippax Fair Shopping Centre (Inside mall opposite The Coffee Club)
Hardwick Crescent, Holt ACT 2615
Phone: (02) 6178 0400
Email: www.nhc.coop/location/kippax

National Health Co-op Evatt

Opening hours: 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday
Address: 8 McClure Place, Evatt ACT 2617
Phone: (02) 6178 0400
Email: www.nhc.coop/location/evatt

Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT (SHFPACT)

SHFPACT offers free or low cost sexual or reproductive health care. They provide pap smears, STIs checks and contraception and fertility advice. All doctors and nurses are female.

You will need to make an appointment.

Opening Hours: Monday – closed
Tuesday to Thursday – 8:30am - 5:00pm
Friday 8:30am - 1:30pm
Some after-hours appointments are available –ask when you make your booking.

Phone: (02) 6247 3077

SMS only: 0400 770 999

Website: www.shfpact.org.au

Address: Level 1, 28 University Ave
Canberra ACT 2601

Community Health's Adult Dental Service

Community Health's Adult Dental Service provides dental treatment to ACT residents who are the primary holder of a current ACT Centrelink issued Pension Concession or Healthcare card. Services are delivered from the Civic and Phillip Health Centres.

There is a maximum co-payment of \$300 for restorative treatment in a year. This payment excludes certain procedures and products. Please call the clinic for more details. Payments can be made in cash, Eftpos, credit card, cheque or Centrepay.

Opening Hours: 8am – 5pm Monday to Friday (check for periodic closures on Wednesday afternoons.)

Phone: (02) 512 9977 Community Health Intake for all clinics

City Community Health Centre

Address: 1 Moore Street
Canberra, ACT 2601

Phillip Community Health Centre

Address: 17 Corrina Street
Phillip, ACT 2606

Tuggeranong Community Health Centre

Address: Anketell Street & Pitman Street
Tuggeranong, ACT 2900

Gungahlin Community Health Centre

Address: 57 Earnest Cavanagh Street
Gungahlin, ACT 2912

Belconnen Community Health Centre

Address: 56 Lathlain Street
Belconnen, ACT 2617

Emergency Dental Services

Emergency dental services are available to eligible adults who need urgent dental treatment. To go to this service you need to be an ACT resident and Centrelink Concession card holder.

There is a minimum charge for this service for adults. Additional fees may apply and can be paid in cash, Eftpos, credit card or cheque. Be sure to bring your current ACT Centrelink Concession Card and details of any medication you are currently taking.

Always phone ahead to check availability, to be assessed and to make an appointment. It is also a good idea to ask about fees at this time.

Opening Hours: Monday – Friday (except public holidays)
Phone: (02) 5124 9977 Community Health Intake

Phone Support

If you need someone to talk to or you would like advice on where to get help, there are phone numbers you can call.

Be aware that even though some services are free to call there may be extra costs for you if you are calling them from a mobile phone.

HealthDirect Australia

If you have a health issue and you do not know what to do you can speak with a registered nurse over the phone. The nurse will be able to help you to know where to go and what to do.

Phone: 1800 022 222 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Calls from landlines are free. Calls from a mobile phone may be charged.

Lifeline

Lifeline offers confidential telephone crisis support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from a landline, payphone or mobile.

If you are experiencing a personal crisis or thinking about suicide you can call Lifeline. Trained volunteer staff are ready to listen, provide support and referral to anyone, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation.

Phone: 13 11 14

Most calls to 13 11 14 from a landline will be charged the cost of a local call, however additional charges may apply for some home phone plans.

Calls to 13 11 14 from mobiles are free. This includes Pre-Paid and Post-Paid customers.

Pre-paid customers who are out-of-credit will be connected to 13 11 14 until their prepaid service is suspended. The out-of-credit period varies depending on providers but is typically between 30 days and 6 months.

Reducing the costs of your Private Health Insurance

If you have private health insurance you might be worried about keeping up with payments. If you are doing it tough financially and/or your circumstances have changed you might want to think about:

- Reassessing whether your current plan meets your needs. The Australian Private Health Ombudsman has a tool to help you compare policies which you can access here: <http://www.privatehealth.gov.au/dynamic/search/start>
- Lowering your premiums. This means choosing to receive only limited benefits, not be covered for certain services or co-paying for certain treatments.
- Any discounts you may be able to get from your provider. For example, if you are a pensioner or a low income earner in the ACT your premium may be reduced because you are entitled to free ambulance cover.
- Requesting a suspension due to financial hardship. Health funds may allow you to suspend your insurance for an agreed amount of time.
- Talking with your health fund about your situation and what options they can offer to help you.

Reducing your Chemist/Pharmacy costs

Filling your prescription can be expensive. To cut some of the costs try to:

- Use your Centrelink Healthcare concession card at all times
- If a medication is covered under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) you will only pay \$6.60 per script, or up to \$41 per script if you do not have a concession card. If a medication is not on the PBS you will be charged the full price.
- Agree to or ask for the generic brand of medication
- Fill your prescription at a discount pharmacy
- If you are in crisis, talk with an emergency support provider. In special circumstances some charities and community organisations may pay for your prescription to be filled.
- Buy at the supermarket. It is cheaper to buy over the counter medications, first aid supplies and feminine hygiene products from the supermarket rather than the pharmacy. Products like paracetamol, antacids, bandaids and tampons will be cheaper at the supermarket.

Unexpected medical costs

Healthcare or medical debts often happen because of unexpected illness or emergency. Big bills like ambulance fees or operations and treatment are daunting.

- If you know you're going to have any kind of surgery or medical treatment always ask for an estimate of costs and a payment plan before agreeing to the treatment if you can.
- Remember if you have a Centrelink Healthcare card medical treatment may be heavily discounted and your debt minimised or cleared.

What support can I get with transport?

Transport can be expensive depending on what type you choose, where you live and where you need to travel. You will have important places and appointments to go to like the bank, the doctor and court. Sometimes getting there could be tricky and you may need to reach out to services, friends and families to get their help so you arrive on time.

Below you will find information on transport options in the ACT. There is also information about getting discounts and ways to save on transport costs.

Buses and Light Rail

ACTION buses are the main form of public transport in the ACT. Bus routes service the majority of Canberra and timetables run regularly through the major town centres of Tuggeranong, Woden, Civic and Belconnen and Gungahlin. Depending on where you live and when and where you need to get to, the bus may be an affordable and easy way to travel.

Light rail services operate between Gungahlin and the City up to every 5 minutes. Detailed light rail frequency can be found on the [CMET website](#).

You can plan your travel using the [Journey Planner](#) which helps you plan your entire journey via light rail, bus, bicycle and walking.

If you are combining your light rail journey with another mode of travel, you may wish to view our [bus timetables](#), [park and ride locations](#), [kiss and ride locations](#) and [active travel page](#).

Use your MyWay card which gives you 90 minutes to tap on and off for your whole integrated trip across light rail and buses. You can purchase a paper ticket, or top up your MyWay card, at ticket vending machines which are located at light rail stops. Find out more: [MyWay and Ticketing page](#).

To find about bus routes, times and any other information visit the Transport Canberra website <https://www.transport.act.gov.au/>

MyWay

If you ride the bus regularly it is a good idea to get a plastic prepaid MyWay card. This card will cost less than a cash fare if you tag off when you leave the bus. Every time you catch the bus you will have a 90 minute transfer period.

This means that from the time you first tag on with your MyWay card you can catch as many buses as you like for free for the next 90 minutes.

You can also register a concession card with your MyWay card and save more!

Cash fares

You can pay in cash for a single or daily ticket on board the bus from the driver. All single fares will give you a 90 minute transfer period. This period lets you connect to a different bus using the same ticket within 90 minutes of purchasing your ticket.

For up-to-date cash fare pricing for adults and concession visit

<https://www.transport.act.gov.au/>.

Always show your concession card

If you have a concession card be sure to link it with your MyWay card or show it to the bus driver when you board. ACTION offers big discounts to eligible concession card holders.

ACTION currently gives concession prices to holders of Healthcare/ Centrelink Concession Cards

Cars/motorcycles

If you are thinking about using a car or motorcycle it is important to think about all the costs involved. Licensing, buying, registration and repairs are some of the expenses you may have to factor in.

Licensing

You will need to have an up-to-date valid driver or motorcycle license to drive a car or motorcycle. To get a license you will have to undertake a driving test or prove you have had a license before and pay a fee. If you have a concession card you may be eligible for discounts on the application fee.

Access Canberra for more information:

https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/answers/detail/a_id/1581/~/act_driver-licence-information or call 13 2281

Co-owned cars

You may co-own a car with the person using violence and are wondering what to do about it. Often, in this case, the person using violence may take the car and the woman is left without transport but still paying her share of the car loan.

If you are in this position you should contact a financial counsellor, like Care Inc. 02 6257 1788, to help you understand your rights and responsibilities financially. They can also help refer you to local free legal support.

Buying a car

Take your time when buying a car. Go in with your eyes open, arm yourself with plenty of information and don't feel pressured to buy. – MoneySmart

If you would like to buy a car or motorcycle the first thing to think about is affordability. Cars can be expensive to run and it is best to do your research and budget before you buy. Here are some things to think about:

1. How much can you afford?

Think about all the costs involved in buying and owning a car or motorbike. Factor in the purchase price and ongoing registration costs, insurance, maintenance and fuel.

If you plan on borrowing money to buy a car or motorbike remember to budget for ongoing loan repayments, fees and charges. Check out the section on the “Do’s and Don’ts of Borrowing Money”. Remember if you can save hard towards a vehicle you will end up spending less than you would with a loan.

2. Choosing a vehicle

Work out which car or motorcycle suits both your budget and your needs. Think about:

- Does your license permit you to drive a manual or will you need an automatic?
Manual cars are often cheaper to run and repair than automatic cars.
- Second hand or new?
- How much can you afford to spend on looking after your car?
- A smaller car is generally cheaper to run if you are mainly city driving. Bigger cars tend to be more expensive to register, service, refill with petrol and buy tyres for.
- Will the car have a good resale value?

3. Set your price range and stick to it!

Work out exactly how much money you have to buy a car or motorcycle. Be sure to factor in the price of the vehicle, the cost of an inspection and the transfer of registration and stamp duty.

With so much advertising and “deals” around it can be difficult to stick to your budget. It can be helpful to shop with someone who can help you to stick to your budget and find the best deal.

If you have found a vehicle that you are keen on you could also try to bargain with dealers to meet your budget. Dealers are often prepared to deal if they know you’re serious and you can come close to the advertised price.

4. Look for the best deal

Once you decide how much you can afford to spend the next step is to do your research. Look online, in the paper, visit a few dealers or auctions. This will give you a good idea of what cars or motorcycles are in your price range and how much you can expect to pay.

5. Registration

The longer registration period on a car for sale the better!

Check the registration on cars and motorcycles that you are looking at. Some cars are sold just before their registration expires. This means that you will have to pay for registration soon after you purchase the car. This can be expensive because on top of registration costs you may have to pay for repairs like new tyres and lights. There is also the compulsory third party insurance to factor in.

When you are looking to buy a car or reregister your vehicle remember if you hold an ACT Seniors Card, Department of Veterans Affairs Gold Card, Health Care Card and/or Pensioner Concession Card holders you may be eligible for a Motor Vehicle Registration Concession. You can also get a concession if your car runs on gas or is electric powered.

For more information on transport and registration assistance in the ACT check out the ACT Government website:

<https://www.act.gov.au/assistance/transport-and-registration>

Get a vehicle inspection before you buy

Vehicle inspections for second-hand cars can seem a bit pricey at first but they can uncover any problems that could be expensive to fix later on.

Check to see how many kilometres the car has done. The numbers should line up and the kilometres should match the service history in the car's log book. If they don't the car's odometer could have been tampered with.

Perhaps you have a friend or family member who knows what to look for and can help you.

The NSW Fair Trading website has a great checklist of what to look for when buying a second-hand car: Money Stuff: Inspection Checklist.

Repairs

If your car or motorcycle needs repairs be sure to shop around to get the best price.

If you hold a Pensioner Concession cards, Health Care Cards or are living on a low wage you may be eligible to apply for a **No Interest Loan** for car repairs. A NILS Loan is available up to a value of \$1500 and can be paid back in instalments from through

Centre pay or your wage. For more information contact [Care Inc Financial Counselling Service](#) on 6257 1788 or the [Salvation Army](#) on 6247 3635

Taxis and Uber

Taking a taxi or Uber regularly can be expensive and exact fares can be hard to predict. Try another option like taking a bus or catching a ride with a friend or family member before jumping in a cab.

What are my housing options?

Housing affordability is a big issue in the ACT. Maintaining a safe, affordable and suitable home is really important. As you age you may find it harder to maintain a home that meets your income, needs and lifestyle changes. Keeping up mortgage repayments and rent, maintenance, like mowing lawns and odd jobs, and paying your bills on a pension may be just some of the difficulties you may face.

Fortunately, there are strategies to cut costs and services and programs in the ACT that can help you if you are struggling financially. Below you will find information about staying in your own home, downsizing, granny flats, public housing options and private rentals and accessing emergency accommodation. There is also information about government support which may be available to you.

Who can help me?

If you would like to talk with someone about your housing options you could contact the Council of the Ageing's (COTA) Housing Options Advisor. They will be able to assist you if you are over 50 and need help with housing issues, such as:

- Funding your housing
- Staying in your present home
- Ways to access equity in your home
- Both public and private housing options
- Accessing community support systems to stay in your home
- What to look for in buying another home
- The range of retirement villages and residential aged care facilities
- Rental options.

To contact the Housing Options Advisor phone COTA (ACT) on 6282 3777 and ask to speak to the Housing Options Advisor. Due to the busy hands-on nature of the role, the Housing Options Advisor is often out supporting people. If you call, be prepared to leave your name and contact details and they will get back to you as soon as possible. Alternatively, you can email at housing@cota-act.org.au.

What are my options?

Staying in my home

If you would like to stay in your own home as you get older but are struggling financially there are a number of options which may be suitable for you. These include:

- **Dual occupancy**

Depending on the size of the home, you may be able to convert it into two homes. This means that you may be able to rent or sell a portion of it as another residence.

- **Boarders and lodgers**

You may consider renting out a room to a boarder or lodger. Be mindful that this arrangement could impact on your Centrelink payments.

- **Mortgages adjustments**

Paying a mortgage regularly is always tough but there are a couple of things you may be able to do to ease this stress and retain your home.

1. Contact your mortgage lender

Contact your mortgage lender as soon as possible. This can be stressful but by doing this you can potentially ease future financial stresses.

If you can explain why you are having trouble repaying the debt it may be possible to work out a repayment plan that suits your needs.

Mortgages and separation

Even if a mortgage is held in two names you may still be able to organise a repayment plan just for you and your budget. A financial counsellor may be able to help you negotiate this.

Financial institutions, like banks, have a responsibility to try and work with you to deal with your debts. If you can, before you contact your mortgage lender get together any relevant paperwork, like statements and contracts.

Write down what you can actually afford to repay with your current budget. This will give you a clearer picture of what you need to negotiate for.

By pulling this information together and writing down what you want out of a negotiation can help settle some of the nerves you may be feeling.

When you contact a creditor always get the name, phone number and position of anyone you speak to about the debt. Check that the person you are talking to can assist you. If not, ask to speak to someone higher up in the company.

2. Discuss with your lender your situation and ask for a change in the terms of your mortgage.

Options you might ask for include:

- An extension of your loan period. This means smaller repayments over a longer period of time

- A suspension of your repayments for a set time
- An extension of the loan period and a suspension of your repayments for a set time
- Any changes which might make your repayments more affordable

Stay calm and never lose your temper! If people are rude or aggressive with you end the call and seek assistance from a financial counsellor.

Be clear about what you want to achieve with any communication with your lenders.

3. Let the mortgage lender know what you can afford

Tell them:

- How much your budgeting allows you to pay off your debt including the interest
- How long it will take you to pay off the debt
- When you can start making payments

Get the lender to explore your options for repayment. This includes repayment arrangements, plans and hardship variation.

When you negotiate don't take 'no' as the only answer. Ask to speak to someone higher up. Show that you are flexible by offering workable solutions. If this does not work and an arrangement can't be agreed on contact a financial counsellor. Financial counsellors have experience in dealing with creditors and will be able to help you.

Don't ever agree to pay more than you know you can afford on a debt.

If a lender agrees to accept your offer always ask them to put any agreements you make in writing and send you a copy. If they do not do this, write to them yourself and confirm the details of the arrangement.

Keep a record of all phone conversations, letters and discussions. This will make it easier for you to show what was said or agreed to on a certain date.

4. Keep a track of your repayments

To keep track of your repayments draw up a timeline which has the balance of the debt in one column and your planned repayment amount and date in another. This can be a great way to see how your debt will reduce over time.

Debt	Repayment	Date

5. Keep your mortgage lender up-to-date

Remember to keep your lender up-to-date. This will show that you are serious. Always tell them if you can't keep up with the repayments. Ask them what else may be done.

What if my mortgage lender doesn't agree?

Sometimes it may be difficult to negotiate with mortgage lenders. Don't fear! There are a couple of actions you can take.

Where can I get more support to stay in my own home as I age?

You may also have other financial concerns about staying in your own home as you age. You might be worried about the cost of transport, making modifications to your home, home maintenance or getting support to do everyday tasks. Sometimes your family, friends and neighbours will assist you with this but this might not be the case or you may need more support.

<https://www.myagedcare.gov.au/> has information about the support you can get to live independently in your own home as you age. Through this website you can locate services which can support you. You can also contact them on 1800 200 422 (Mon-Fri 8am-8pm, Sat 10am-2pm) for more information.

Downsizing

If you are struggling to pay your mortgage or rent it may be more affordable for you to downsize. This means looking for a house to rent or buy which is smaller, less expensive and more energy efficient to help cut down the cost of bills. It is also a good idea to think about location, transport options and access to services, like medical professionals and shops.

When doing this think about the costs involved. This could include things like real estate fees, stamp duty, inspection and valuation fees, as well as removalist fees.

For more information see the MoneySmart webpage on downsizing in retirement:

<https://moneysmart.gov.au/retirement-income/downsizing-in-retirement>

Retirement Accommodation⁴

If you are considering moving to a retirement village there are some important things you will need to think about. Retirement villages provide independent, semi-supported and flexible living options to suit your needs and circumstances.

Normally when you enter into a retirement village you do not own your unit but are bound by a contract. You and the retirement village have legal rights and responsibilities which should be stated in this contract. Before you sign any contract you should seek legal and/or financial advice. It is important to understand all the fees and charges in the contract, including how they could be increased and understand your rights and responsibilities under the Retirement Village Code of Practice ACT.

You should also understand and check the terms and conditions for leaving a retirement village. This includes exit fees and refunds on entry contribution.

For more information about your rights and responsibilities check out the ACCC's website at <http://www.accc.gov.au/consumers/home-car/retirement-homes> or call them on 1300 302 502. You can also find information on the Department of Social Services website at <http://www.myagedcare.gov.au/> or by phoning 1800 200 422 (Mon-Fri 8am-8pm, Sat 10am-2pm).

Aged care⁵

If you have reached a point where a lot of help is needed in the home, it might be a good idea to think about aged care.

- **Organise an Aged Care Assessment** - This assessment will help see the level of care you require and help you to look at programs and facilities that met your needs. For more information visit <https://www.myagedcare.gov.au/assessment>
- **Do your research on potential facilities** – Have a look around at a number of aged care facilities. This can help you see what to expect and whether one place is better than another. Use the myagedcare service finder to help you locate aged care facilities in your area: <https://www.myagedcare.gov.au/find-a-provider/> You may like to bring a family or friends to help you do this.
- **Look at your finances** – You'll need to know how your finances look to see how much you'll have for your Aged Care needs. This means working out your assets and

⁴ Information adapted from the MoneySmart website: Australian Securities & Investments Commission 2013, "Aged Care", accessed 21/03/2014: < <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/life-events-and-you/over-55s/aged-care>>.

⁵ Information adapted from the MoneySmart website: Australian Securities & Investments Commission 2013, "Aged Care", accessed 21/03/2014: < <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/life-events-and-you/over-55s/aged-care>>.

budgeting. To get an idea of how much Aged Care facilities charge and how this relates to your own financial situation visit <http://www.myagedcare.gov.au/considering-aged-care-home/fees-and-charges> or phone 1800 200 422 (Mon-Fri 8am-8pm, Sat 10am-2pm). A Centrelink [Financial Information Service officer](#) (FIS) can help you sort out your finances and understand financial obligations around Aged Care. Contact a FIS on 132 300 (Mon –Fri, 8am – 8pm).

ACT Housing Assistance

Access to public housing rental is given to eligible people [and their families] who are low income earners. Public housing is low cost. The rental bond is equal to 2 weeks rent. Tenants pay a maximum of 25% of their income in rent.

People approved for early allocation are given accommodation more quickly than other people who are already registered on the applicant list for housing. For more information about Early Allocation of Housing phone 6207 1150.

To apply for public housing assistance you need to complete a [Registration to apply for Social Housing Assistance in the ACT](#). You can download this form from the ACT Housing website or visit the Housing ACT Gateway Services to get an Application for a Housing Assistance Kit which has an application form and general information about eligibility and the process for applying. You will need to submit your application in person at Housing ACT Gateway Services.

Once you have applied for government housing you will have to attend an interview. The interview will help Housing ACT process your application and understand your position better. You can take a support person, like a friend, family member or service provider, with you to the interview.

For more information and to lodge your application:

Phone: 6207 1150 or 133 427

Website: https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/how_to_apply

Visit: Housing ACT Gateway Services
Central Access Point for Housing and Homelessness
Nature Conservation House, Cnr Emu Bank & Benjamin Way
Belconnen Town Centre
(Open 9:00am to 5:00pm Mon to Fri)

If you are eligible for public housing and have lodged an application, you may also be eligible for the “Housing Now” program. Sometimes properties available do not suit the

people on the top of the public housing list. These properties are then offered, through the Housing Now program, to people lower on the list.

Housing Now is different to Early Allocation of Housing because you do not need to be in crisis to sign up for the Housing Now program.

For more information about Housing Now phone 6207 1150 and ask to speak to the Housing Now Officer.

Private rental

Affordable and suitable private rental can be hard to find in Canberra.

Before you start looking or sign a lease it is a good idea to do a budget. Factor in what you can afford and include costs like 4 week's worth of rent as a bond, ongoing rental payments and gas, electricity and water bills.

Finding the right rental property may take a while. Look at websites that list short and long term rental and share listings like www.gumtree.com.au and www.allhomes.com.au.

You can also check the Canberra Times classifieds and local real estate agencies for rental advertisements. Looking at these websites will also give you an idea of how much money you will need to budget for rent, bond and sometimes utilities.

What financial assistance for housing is available to me?

Centrelink Rent Assistance

If you receive a Centrelink support payment you may be eligible for Rent Assistance to help cover the costs of private rental. You will need to provide proof that you pay rent.

To find out more about Rent Assistance check out

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/rent-assistance> or visit a [Centrelink Support Office](#).

ACT Housing's Rental Rebate Assistance

ACT Housing's Rental Rebate Assistance is provided for a maximum of 6 months for people accessing ACT Housing. You will need to complete an [Application for a Rental Rebate form](#). You can submit this form by:

Post: Housing ACT
 Locked Bag 3000
 Belconnen ACT 2616

In person: Housing ACT Gateway Services
 Central Access Point for Housing and Homelessness
 Nature Conservation House
 Cnr Emu Bank & Benjamin Way
 Belconnen Town Centre
 (Open 9:00am to 5:00pm Mon to Fri)

Drop off box: **City Health Centre**
 1 Moore Street, Canberra City (Open 8:30am to
 5:00pm Mon to Fri)
 Access Canberra
 Homeworld Shopping Centre, Scollay Street
 Tuggeranong ACT 2900
 (Open 9:00am to 5:00pm Mon to Fri)
 For more information phone 6207 1150.

Getting help to pay a rental bond

Rental Bonds Loan Scheme

ACT Housing may be able to help you if you are having trouble paying a private rental bond. If you are eligible you may be able to get a loan of 90% of the bond

needed. You will need to pay this bond loan back by direct debit over 20 months. Repayments must start 3 months after you get the loan.

To apply you will need to visit the Central Access Point for Housing and Homelessness and get a Rental Bond Loan application kit.

Phone: 13 34 27

Visit: Housing ACT Gateway Services
Central Access Point for Housing and Homelessness
Nature Conservation House
Cnr Emu Bank & Benjamin Way
Belconnen Town Centre
(Open 9:00am to 5:00pm Mon to Fri)

How can I afford to stay connected? Phones and internet access

Staying connected with friends, family and services may often be easier by phone, mobile or internet. Knowing what to buy and how to keep costs down can help make this less stressful for you and your budget.

Keeping mobile phone costs down⁶

The best way to keep your mobile costs down is to know what you need your phone for. Here are some tips to keep your costs down:

- Choose a prepaid or plan option which best suits your needs. If you like to make calls instead of texting choose a package which gives you the most amount of free calls or if you like texting choose a package with free texts.
- Choosing a provider that is the same as your friends or family can save you money. Often services offer free calls or texts to people in the same network.
- Prepaid plans are generally easier to control on a tight budget. This is because you have to choose to recharge it rather than a plan which may keep charging you over what you wanted to spend.
- If you choose a plan, start on a low or cheaper plan. You can often increase your plan but it can be difficult to decrease it.
- The savings phone companies advertise may not always result in savings.
- Know how much calls, texts and internet access cost on your current plan. This includes calls to voicemail, message bank, directory numbers and 13 and 1800 numbers.
- Keep a close eye on your account or spending meter. This way you can see when you are running low on credit or you are reaching your plan's cap. Be aware that most service providers will charge for paper statements.
- Take advantage of the free calls, text and data your phone company offers. You can also try calling in off peak times to cut costs.
- Remember streaming or downloading video, music and images can be expensive.
- Smartphone apps, like Facebook or Skype, continue to draw data from your account if they are not closed properly. Be sure to close apps which you are not using and turn off "push notifications" in your settings.

Push notifications allow a Smartphone app to notify you of information like sports scores, weather or Facebook messages without you needing to open the app fully. By turning this setting off you will not only save money but also phone battery.

⁶ <http://accan.org.au/consumer-info/tip-sheets/mobile-and-broadband-everyday-money-saving-tips>

You can turn off push notifications by visiting your phone's 'settings' and then clicking 'off' next to 'notifications'. Each time you open a newly downloaded app you can also select not to have the push notifications function on for that app.

- Limit subscriptions and In-app purchases. These small expenses can add up quickly. If you get charged for any mobile premium subscriptions, like sport and horoscopes, which you haven't signed up for, contact your service provider.
- **For more information about buying a mobile phone and keeping costs down check out:**
 - <http://accan.org.au/talking-telco/your-mobile/choosing-a-mobile-plan>
 - <https://moneysmart.gov.au/student-life-and-money/choosing-a-mobile-phone-plan>

Always read and understand a contract, especially the fine print, before you sign!

"Beware of terms such as "capped", "free", "unlimited"; and asterisks * or other symbols – make sure you read what they refer to. In particular, make sure you understand about any limitations and exceptions which can lead to extra charges." - ACCAN

Before you enter into a contract for a phone, mobile or internet connection check out the sections on "Dos and don'ts of borrowing money" and "Dealing with debt".

What if I can't afford to pay my phone, mobile or telephone bill?

If you are having trouble paying your bills there are a couple of things you can do: Contact the company which gave you the bill. Ask them about:

- **Hardship policies and programs**

Services, like telecommunications, are required to have policies and programs in place to assist you if you're experiencing financial hardship. They should listen to your circumstances and help work with you to create a repayment plan.

- Telstra Access for Everyone Program

If you are experiencing financial difficulty and are having problems paying your Telstra bill you could be eligible for the Access for Everyone Program. The Access for Everyone program was designed to assist people on a low income, or facing financial hardship, maintain telecommunications access.

You will find information about this and other Telstra assistance at:

<https://www.telstra.com.au/aboutus/community-environment/communityprograms/access-for-everyone>

If you can't reach an agreement:

Get the help of a free financial counsellor. A financial counsellor can help you to organise a repayment strategy or hardship policy with the service provider. They can also support you with information and advice on budgeting for bills. Contact:

Care Inc. Financial Counselling

Address: Level CCG, House
219 London Circuit
Canberra City

Office hours: Monday - Friday 9am to 5pm

Phone: (02) 6257 1788

Email: admin@carefcs.org

Don't ignore the problem! Dealing with a debt quickly is likely to have a better outcome on your budget and stress levels.

Salvation Army's Moneycare Canberra

Website: <https://salvos.org.au/need-help/financial-assistance/financialcounselling/>

Phone: 1300 371 288

Please note that not all Moneycare services are full time and that due to demand for services there may be a waiting period before an appointment is available.

Free emergency phone use

If you are in crisis and have a Centrelink Health Care card [Contact Canberra Community Information \(formerly Citizens Advice Bureau ACT\) Shopfront](#) has phones you may be able to use.

Where can I access free internet or wifi in the ACT?**ACT Libraries**

[ACT Libraries](#) have free internet and wifi access. Each public library location has public computers for use. You can also use the ACT Libraries wifi through a personal computer or wifi enabled phone inside the library without a username and password.

Be aware that there is a fee for printing.

Visit your local public library, phone 02 6205 9000 or check out <https://www.library.act.gov.au/> to find out more.

Community Organisations and Centres

If you are in crisis certain community organisations and centres offer free internet access. These services will also be able to connect you with other services to help you during this time.

[UnitingCare's Early Morning Centre](#) offers free internet and a range of other services to support you in crisis.

Free wifi

There are points across Canberra where you can access free wifi. Try local shopping centres and cafes.

CBRfree public WiFi CBRfree is Canberra's public Wi-Fi network. CBRfree provides users with access up to 1 gigabyte per day over a fast broadband connection at specific locations.

For more information visit: <https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/digital/cbrfree-public-wifi>

Always keep your password safe and delete your internet browsing history!

How do I delete my browsing history on the internet?

The way you delete your browsing history depends on which internet browser you are using. Internet browsers are applications which let you browse the internet. Major internet browsers include Google Chrome, Internet Explorer, Safari and Mozilla Firefox.

As a general rule you can delete your browsing history by following these steps:

1. In the toolbar or menu select 'Tools'.
2. Under the 'Tools' drop down menu select 'History'.
3. Select 'Clear History'. This may also be called 'Clear Recent History', 'Clear Private data' or 'Delete Browsing History'.

If you are having trouble deleting your internet history try asking a friend or family member to show you how. You could also ask a librarian or do an internet search for 'How to delete internet browsing history'.

Why should I have an email account?

If you do not have an email already, it is a good idea to get one. An email is an electronic message or letter sent via the internet. It is a popular way for people to communicate for personal and business reasons. With an email your bank,

Centrelink and other services will also be able to contact you quickly and send you important information.

Most email accounts are free. Gmail, hotmail and yahoo all provide free email accounts.

What do I need to know about Wills⁷, Powers of Attorney and going guarantor?

Why is it important to have a will?

A Will is the only legal way you can ensure that your property and assets are distributed the way you would like them to be. It is also an effective way of making sure you provide security for any dependent children. This includes ongoing care and education. It will also help to avoid any difficulties or disputes over your property and assets after you pass away.

If you die without leaving an up-to-date will the government will divide your property and assets according to their formula. This may not reflect your current wishes and family circumstances.

So having an up-to-date Will is essential to making sure your assets are handled the way you would like them to be. Even though it is a difficult topic to think about, protecting your assets in this way can help your family and protect the money you have worked hard for.

It is also a good idea to update your Will if your circumstances have changed. Updating your will to reflect your new circumstances will make sure your assets and property are distributed as you wish them to be now.

How do I make a will?

A will can be written and updated by the Public Trustee for the ACT 02 6207 9800 (Monday – Friday, 9.00am - 4.30pm) or by a solicitor of your choosing. You may also purchase a Will kit from an Australia post outlet. It is important to keep in mind that a Will must be signed and witnessed properly for it to be valid. The [Public Trustee for the ACT](http://www.publictrustee.act.gov.au/wills) 02 6207 9800 (Monday – Friday, 9.00am - 4.30pm) can help you to make your Will.

As part of making a Will you will need to nominate a person to manage your affairs after you pass away. The executor will need to take on the following duties:

- Locate the Will
- Find and secure your property and assets
- Prove your Will in Court;
- Manage and deal with any debts you have
- Establish any Trusts you may have mentioned in your Will
- Organise your income tax returns
- Deal with capital gains issues
- Share your property and assets according to your Will.

⁷ <<http://www.publictrustee.act.gov.au/wills>>.

The executor you choose should be aware of their legal responsibilities and have a good understanding of financial, legal, accounting and tax matters. They should also understand that managing the wishes laid out in your Will may be demanding. If you are having trouble deciding on who will be your executor you can appoint the Public Trustee for the ACT. They have the expertise and experience to help you with this matter and offer unbiased and confidential services.

Keep your will in a safe and secure location. You may also get the Public Trustee or solicitor who helped you prepare your Will to store it at their premises. You should also keep a copy of the will yourself.

What is a Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney?

By selecting a Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney you give someone the legal authority to look after your affairs on your behalf.

A **Power of Attorney** is a legal document that appoints a nominated trustworthy person to act on your behalf on legal and financial matters. This is only valid while you have legal capacity.

An **Enduring Power of Attorney** is also legal document that appoints a nominated trustworthy person to act on your behalf on legal and financial matters. The main difference is that an Enduring Power of Attorney continues to be valid even after you lose legal capacity.

What is "legal capacity"?⁸

Legal capacity relates to a person's ability to fully understand the nature and implications of a document they are required to sign.

If there is doubt about a person's legal capacity, a medical report may be needed to confirm the person's ability to conduct their own financial and legal affairs.

Why is it important to appoint a Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney?

You may need someone to manage your financial and legal affairs in the event of an accident, illness, planned or unexpected absence or when you just can't cope. Appointing a Power of Attorney will help you deal with financial and legal responsibilities during these times.

It is a good idea to appoint a Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney while you have legal capacity. Many people do not realise how important it is until it is too late!

⁸ <http://www.publictrustee.act.gov.au/powers-of-attorney>

How do I appoint a Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney?

You can appoint a Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney through the Public Trustee of the ACT for a fixed fee. You can also appoint them as your Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney if you do not have another option.

Contact them on (02) 6207 9800 (Monday – Friday, 9.00am - 4.30pm).

How do I cancel Power of Attorney or Enduring Power of Attorney?

You can cancel your Power of Attorney in writing at any time, provided you have the legal capacity to do so.

For information see the Public Trustee of the ACT for more information webpage <http://www.publictrustee.act.gov.au/powers-of-attorney> or call them on (02) 6207 9800 (Monday – Friday, 9.00am - 4.30pm).

Going Guarantor

If you are a guarantor, you have promised to repay a loan if the borrower does not pay. A guarantor is legally liable to pay the borrower's debt if the borrower stops paying and the credit provider has been unable to recover the money from the borrower. Generally a lender will ask for someone to 'go guarantor' if there is a risk to the loan being repaid as agreed.

It is always best to avoid being a guarantor on a loan. This type of debt can cause great difficulty between the parties involved particularly during separation or divorce and also between parents and children.

Always seek advice about the implications of becoming a guarantor for someone else's debt ***before*** you enter into any agreement so that you understand fully what it means.

Occasionally people lose valuable assets such as their homes if they have to repay a debt that they have guaranteed. If you are a guarantor and are asked to pay a debt, seek advice from a free legal service or financial counsellor about how to proceed.