



Australian Government



Inspector-General of Taxation
Taxation Ombudsman



FOR MEDIA

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How to tell people they owe the government money – Best practice principles for notifying people about debts

Prompted by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) re-activating or off-setting very old debts, today the Commonwealth Ombudsman, ACT Ombudsman and Inspector-General of Taxation and Taxation Ombudsman published: *How to tell people they owe the government money – Best practice principles for notifying people about debts*.

Mr Iain Anderson, Commonwealth Ombudsman and ACT Ombudsman, and Ms Karen Payne, Inspector-General of Taxation and Taxation Ombudsman, said *‘while the law may require agencies to take certain action, agencies are responsible for determining how they take that action in a way that minimises distress to affected and impacted people.’*

Agencies should keep the impact on people at the centre of their approach. Consider the best practice principles outlined in this publication when re-raising and notifying people about older debts that have been ‘written off’ or ‘paused’:

1. **WHY:** *Be transparent and accountable* – build and maintain public trust and confidence in the agency and its purpose
2. **WHAT:** *Tell people what the debt is and where it comes from* – think about the person you are communicating with
3. **HOW:** *Provide clear information for requesting review, debt waivers and repayment arrangements* – tell people about rights to seek review and waiver and make sure they have access to sufficient information to fully participate in the process
4. **HELP:** *Provide contacts for people to find out more information* – there will always be circumstances where people have additional questions, require more information or just need to speak to a person about their situation
5. **LEARN:** *Learn and improve* – undertaking a process such as recovery of old debts is a valuable opportunity to identify lessons learnt and implement changes to improve future practices.

Mr Anderson and Ms Payne noted that agencies should reflect on past experiences and consider observations and recommendations from oversight bodies to continuously improve their engagement with the Australian community.

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