

Australia's Financial Inclusion Action Plan (FIAP) Program: Ashurst Tackles Financial Exclusion through an Integrated Approach



Around the world, financial exclusion is placing people and families at risk of financial hardship and costing economies. To combat financial exclusion, the Australian Government has partnered with Good Shepherd Microfinance, The Centre for Social Impact and EY to launch Australia's first Financial Inclusion Action Plan (FIAP).

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To date, 33 trailblazer organisations, including Ashurst as the first law firm to sign up to the program, have committed to tackling financial exclusion together through creating more accessible products and services, improving capability-building and enhancing economic participation.

Financial exclusion in Australia

Financial exclusion is defined as the lack of access to appropriate and affordable financial products and services. In 2018, 11% of Australian adults (2.1 million) reported experiencing severe or high levels of financial distress, and over three million were excluded in some way from obtaining appropriate financial services and products. In the same year, 19% (2.4 million) of Australian employees were moderately or severely financially stressed, with single parent families most at risk of financial stress. While the causes of financial exclusion in Australia are complex and interconnected, research suggests that key contributing factors include income inequality, financial illiteracy, geographic remoteness and relational abuse.

The Financial Inclusion Action Plan (FIAP) Program

In 2015, the Australian Government prioritised financial inclusion by committing to international obligations including the G20 Financial Inclusion Action Plan and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. To deliver on this commitment, the Federal Minister for Social Services commissioned Good Shepherd Microfinance, Australia's largest microfinance provider, to develop and oversee Australia's first Financial Inclusion Action Plan program. In partnership with the Centre for Social Impact and EY, Good Shepherd Microfinance has created a platform for Australian organisations across diverse sectors to take practical steps to reduce financial exclusion within their spheres of influence. In the legal sector, Ashurst and Corrs Chambers Westgarth are championing the FIAP program and inviting other law firms to do the same.

Case Study: Ashurst's FIAP 2018-2019

Ashurst is committed to harnessing its diverse commercial skill set and collective expertise to equip financially vulnerable Australians with the skills and frameworks necessary to realise financial inclusion. In pro bono, Ashurst has created a secondment to support a new financial abuse clinic at Redfern Legal Centre in Sydney. The clinic will open its doors very soon and will focus on women.



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Additionally, Ashurst has developed an internal Australia-wide referrals database. Ashurst's FIAP Referrals Database offers clients a more integrated legal service, with support contacts across the country from 30 categories such as affordable housing, child support, disability services, financial services and mental health services. While in its early phase, the database is proving a key resource for connecting Ashurst pro bono clients to broader support systems and networks. Ashurst has also made the database contents available to other trailblazers, and the Australian Pro Bono Centre.

However, Ashurst's FIAP is not just externally focused. Ashurst is offering its staff superannuation and financial awareness training, and a central hub for all policies and resources relating to financial inclusion. Further, at the supplier level, Ashurst is in the process of identifying new ways to support financial inclusion, such as through introducing event catering from Aboriginal suppliers via Supply Nation, and purchasing gifts for external speakers from similar sources.

Financial exclusion can no longer be ignored by governments and industry leaders. Leading the way, Australia's Financial Inclusion Action Program is offering an integrated approach to realising financial inclusion that draws upon the collective expertise and resources of government, corporate and community sectors. Through measurable actions targeted at enhancing the accessibility of products, services and economic involvement, trailblazer organisations like Ashurst are facilitating financial inclusion and creating a more equal, sustainable Australia. ■

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Sarah is a partner and global head of pro bono and corporate responsibility at Ashurst. With a background in human rights, particularly, gender rights and reproductive rights, she works full time in pro bono and CR. Sarah has previously worked at the Center of Reproductive Rights and International Planned Parenthood Federation. Sarah sits on the Business Council of Australia's Indigenous Engagement Taskforce, TrustLaw's Council and is Chair of the International Bar Association's Pro Bono Committee.



Michael Joyce

Michael is a Facilitator for the Financial Inclusion Action Plan Program at Good Shepherd Microfinance. He has specialised in financial inclusion for the past 10 years, including working in Cambodia, Bangladesh, Indonesia and for the UN-based "Better Than Cash Alliance" in New York. He has been an early-stage consultant for several mobile money startups that together reach over 30 million people who were previously unbanked, and process billions of dollars every month.



Madeleine Causbrook

Madeleine is a graduate lawyer at Ashurst with a commitment to victims' rights law reform and advocacy. She has written extensively on a range of social justice issues for the firm. In 2018 she received a National Council of Women of NSW Australia Day Award for her LLB (Hons) thesis on the NSW Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme. Madeleine is passionate about eliminating domestic violence, which is a key cause of financial exclusion in Australia.