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NEWS

Government shakes up SPER laws as Ipswich racks up debt

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PAYING UP: Ipswich residents owe \$22.3 million to the State Penalties Enforcement Registry.

Iain Curry

THE Queensland parliament has passed legislation that will shake up the way SPER debt is collected.

SPER, the State Penalties Enforcement Registry, is a division of the Queensland Treasury which collects and enforces unpaid fines and other monetary penalties.

At the start of this year, Ipswich residents (postcode 4305) owed \$23, 539,000 million to the State Penalties Enforcement Registry.

Combined with the outstanding figures from Goodna, Camira and Springfield of \$17.9 million the overall community's debt is even higher - a whopping \$40.2 million.

The new law will enable SPER to adopt a targeted 'case management' approach to debt collection.

Under the old system, SPER would assess each debt individually, rather than taking into account a person's entire financial situation when assessing their ability to pay a fine.

FLASHBACK | SPER debt

>> SPER: Govt cracking down on Ipswich's \$40M debt

>> COMMENT: SPER debt reaching new heights

>> City's SPER debt tops \$44M in 2015

Treasurer Curtis Pitt said the new approach would enhance SPER's ability to take enforcement action against people who chose not to pay debts, making it harder for repeat defaulters to get away with not paying.

"It will also make it easier for people who want to pay their fine to do so, and offer greater support for those who genuinely need it," Mr Pitt said.

The changes also make it possible to pay off SPER debt through non-financial options such as counselling, education and community work, managed by local sponsor groups who will recommend and supervise activities.

The program will be open to people unable to pay debts for reasons including domestic and family violence, homelessness, financial hardship, intellectual or cognitive disability, mental illness of substance use disorder.

Government shakes up SPER debt lawsA new \$58.8 million debt recovery computer system has also been commissioned, to be implemented in the second half of this year, along with an outbound call campaign to remind people when they have debts owing.

Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic coordinator Stephen Grace gave a cautious welcome to the changes, calling them "a good start".

"A person experiencing a period of homelessness is more likely to interact with the criminal justice system for public space type offences," Mr Grace said.



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DEBT SHAKEUP: Queensland Treasurer Curtis Pitt (left).

ChrisJson ROK221015cpitt5

"As a result of these interactions, many of our clients have incurred sizeable State Penalties Enforcement Registry debts that they are unable to pay without experiencing significant, further hardship.

"While the proposed scheme is a good start, we encourage the Government to continue to engage with the community sector to ensure that the proposed changes are implemented in a fair, clear and flexible manner appropriate to the difficulties faced by our clients."

SPER DEBT | The Stats

Ipswich residents (postcode 4305) owe \$22.3 million to the State Penalties Enforcement Registry

Combined with the outstanding figures from Goodna, Camira and Springfield of \$17.9 million the overall community's debt is even higher - a whopping \$40.2 million

\$240.2 million collected by SPER state-wide since July 2016

\$359,008,435 owed to SPER state-wide through the court system

\$737,629,250 owed to SPER state-wide through the State Government



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