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CONQUERING THE MAZE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO NAVIGATING RETIREMENT CONCESSIONS AND ENTITLEMENTS

BY WEALTH ADVISER

The Challenge for Retirees

Every year, thousands of Australians nearing or in retirement confront the same frustrating bureaucracy: a complex and often confusing patchwork of federal and state concession schemes designed to ease the cost of living—but difficult to find, claim, or renew. As noted in Firstlinks' *A National Guide to Concession Entitlements* (2025), even well-educated retirees routinely describe the process as “relentless.” They face multiple agencies—Services Australia, Veterans’ Affairs, Medicare, and local governments—all with their own forms, renewal cycles, and fine print. For many, the challenge is not whether these benefits exist, but how to actually access them before fatigue and confusion take hold.

Yet with persistence and clearer guidance, the available benefits can make a meaningful difference. Cost-of-living pressures are biting hard in 2025: electricity, transport, and medication are taking a larger share of retirees’ budgets. A well-planned approach to government concessions can generate hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars a year in savings—enough to relieve real financial stress.

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BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

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Major Concession Cards: A Foundation of Support

Pensioner Concession Card (PCC)

Automatically issued to Australians who qualify for the Age Pension or certain other income-support payments, the PCC offers broad coverage. It entitles holders to cheaper PBS medicines, access to bulk-billing doctors in many cases, lower utility bills, and council rate concessions. Discounts also extend to vehicle registration, recreation, and even water rates or dental services, depending on each state's agreements.

Commonwealth Seniors Health Card (CSHC)

For retirees who do not qualify for the Age Pension but still face modest incomes, the CSHC remains one of the most important support instruments. As of October 2025, eligible singles must earn less than \$99,025 a year and couples less than \$158,440 combined, with no assets test applied. These cards unlock access to the concessional PBS safety net, meaning cheaper or free prescription medicines after reaching the annual threshold, and rebates on out-of-pocket medical fees.

Financial advisers often point out that couples with substantial super balances but limited income can qualify. For example, a self-funded retiree couple drawing \$100,000 a year in account-based pension income would receive the CSHC despite holding a portfolio worth over \$3 million.

State and Territory Seniors Cards

All states run their own Seniors Card schemes, offering transport and local business discounts. Eligibility usually begins at 60 years old with a requirement to work less than 20 hours per week in paid employment.

Examples:

- **NSW Seniors Card and Senior Savers Card:** Free weekday travel in regional areas and capped daily fares of \$2.50 on public transport.
- **Victoria Seniors Card:** Seniors can travel free during off-peak periods and receive energy rebates.
- **Queensland Seniors Card:** Discounts on vehicle registration, electricity rebates of \$372.20 per year, capped water usage charges, and council rates concessions in most areas.

While benefits differ by location, interstate recognition arrangements increasingly allow seniors to use transport discounts outside their home state—an important but underused provision for travelling retirees.

Age Pension and Eligibility in 2025

The Age Pension is both a safety net and a gateway to many other entitlements. The qualifying age is now 67. Applicants must be Australian residents for at

least 10 years, including 5 continuously, and meet income and asset thresholds that change twice each year.

Maximum Fortnightly Payments (September 2025):

- Singles: \$1,116.30
- Couples (combined): \$1,682.80

Assets Test (Homeowners):

- Full pension: single \$321,500 | couple \$481,500
- Part pension cut-off: single \$704,500 | couple \$1,059,000

Income Test:

Payments are reduced once income exceeds \$204 (fortnightly) for singles or \$360 for couples. At higher thresholds, eligibility phases out entirely.

Applicants should apply through their MyGov account or at a Services Australia office, ensuring they upload full documentation—proof of age, citizenship, bank balances, superannuation statements, and partnership details. Errors or omissions are a major cause of delay. Many retirees underestimate their entitlement by not including deductible expenses or failing to update changes in assets.

Practical Steps to Navigating the System

1. Identify What You're Entitled To

Use the federal government's Eligibility Checker or free retirement calculators. These tools estimate your likely qualification for the Age Pension, Rent Assistance, and key health cards.

2. Gather Documentation Early

Prepare essential evidence before starting your application. This includes Medicare numbers, tax file numbers, superannuation balances, investment account summaries, and identification. Keeping updated copies prevents repeat requests from Services Australia.

3. Apply or Renew on Time

Most benefits require renewal. Missing deadlines can suspend concessions automatically, particularly for state programs. Register a MyGov account notification alert and keep hard copies of recent approvals for future claims.

4. Combine Federal and State Benefits

Many retirees overlook the compounding value of "stacking" different rebates. For example, a couple receiving the Age Pension may simultaneously use a PCC for prescription discounts, a state Seniors Card for transport, and a council rate rebate. Together these may reduce expenses by over \$2,000 per year.

Real-Life Application: A Case Study

John and Margaret, homeowners in suburban Brisbane, retired in mid-2025 with combined assets of \$900,000 and income of \$75,000 a year drawn from super. Despite initially assuming they were not eligible, their adviser guided them through the CSHC application. Within weeks, they gained access to discounted PBS medicines and out-of-pocket

medical safety-net thresholds.

Margaret also applied for the Queensland Seniors Card and began saving \$7 a week on transport plus \$372 per year on electricity rebates. Together these measures improved their household cash flow by over \$2,500 annually –without any change to lifestyle or investment risk. Their story underlines how informed navigation of concessions forms part of a broader financial resilience strategy.

Technology, Tools, and the Future

Government digital platforms have improved significantly. MyGov and Services Australia now integrate most applications online, supporting secure document uploads and progress tracking. Energy, insurance, and superannuation comparison sites run by government agencies remain free of commercial bias and are often the most accurate for retirees reviewing household costs.

Independent efforts, like the SeniorsKit project launched by Later Life Advice, use AI to map concessions by postcode and personal situation. These emerging tools aim to replace lists with actionable dashboards—bringing what Firstlinks called “a clean, coherent picture of the benefits people already qualify for.”

Meanwhile, advocacy groups such as National Seniors Australia continue campaigning for consistent national standards and automatic recognition across states. Their Fairer Concessions initiative calls for simplified eligibility rules, unified renewal systems, and full digital access regardless of where seniors reside.

Building Financial Resilience in Retirement

Accessing entitlements is not about dependency—it’s about efficiency. Concessions and government benefits represent money already allocated to older Australians. Used wisely, they reduce unnecessary drawdowns from superannuation, preserving capital and income sustainability.

Financial planners increasingly integrate this process into formal advice: cross-checking client eligibility during annual reviews, coordinating documentation, and building strategies around both private and public income sources. A well-advised retiree leverages every tool available—from super tax planning to the simple but powerful Seniors Card savings.

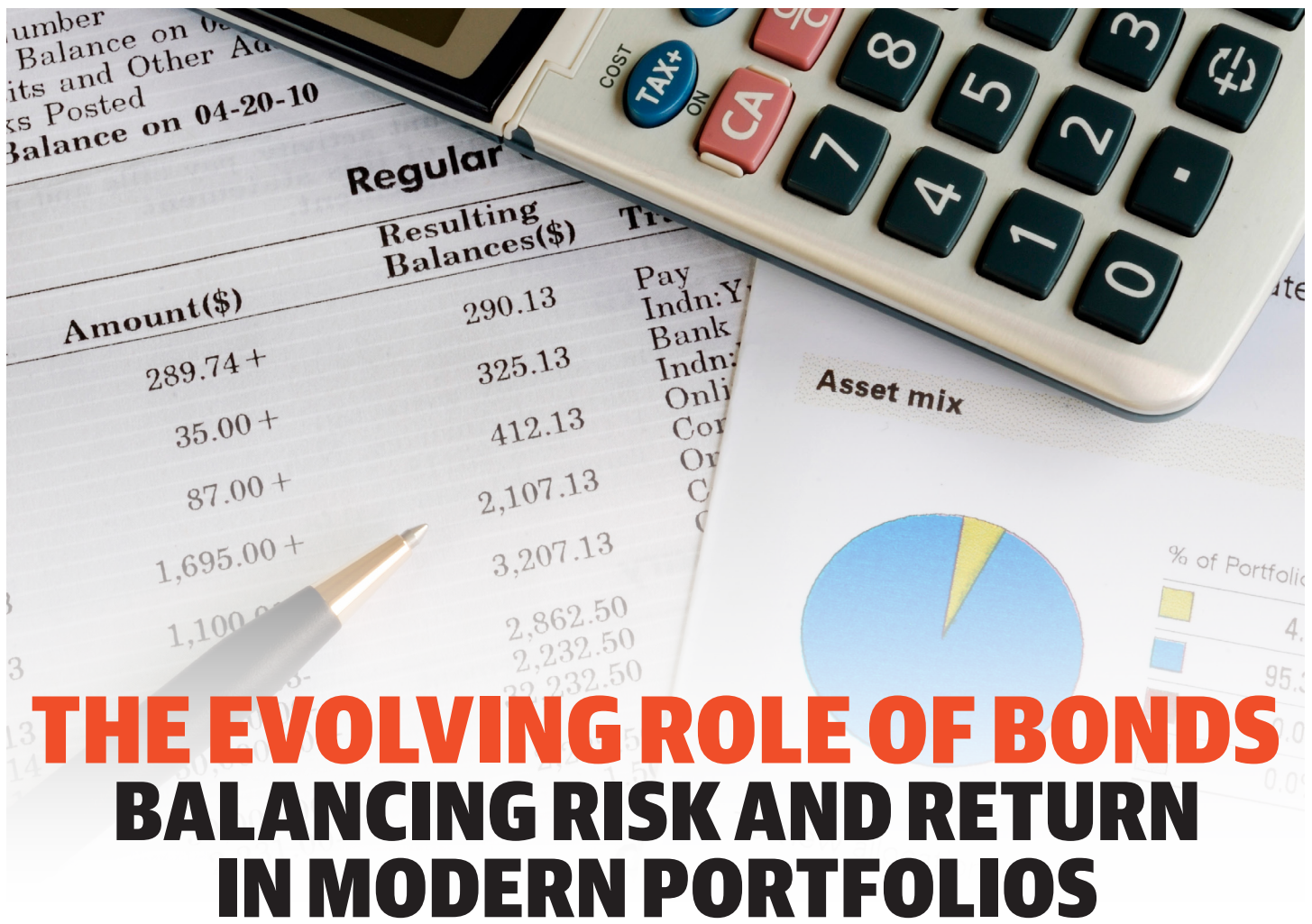
Conclusion

Retirement finances are challenging enough without the added complexity of fragmented entitlements. But clarity and persistence transform the process from ordeal to opportunity. Knowing which cards to apply for, how to coordinate federal and state benefits, and when to seek professional help can save substantial sums each year.

The system remains far from simple, but progress is visible. Digital dashboards, harmonised concessions, and stronger national advocacy suggest the maze is starting to open. For now, the message is clear: stay informed, stay organised, and claim every benefit you’ve earned.

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THE EVOLVING ROLE OF BONDS BALANCING RISK AND RETURN IN MODERN PORTFOLIOS

BY WEALTH ADVISER

Introduction: Bonds Beyond the Headlines

For many years, bonds have quietly played a background role in Australian investment narratives, dismissed by some as “the cardigan and slippers of the investment world.” Yet, in an environment where shifting economic cycles and market volatility have become the rule rather than the exception, bonds are once again stepping into focus. 2025 brings a renewed interest in understanding not just how bonds work, but why they continue to matter in the ongoing quest to balance risk with return.

Much of the public discourse in recent years has been centred on equities—companies, share prices, and the allure of rapid gains. This focus often overshadows the depth and flexibility of the fixed income universe, which encompasses government bonds, corporate debt, securitised assets, and more. Current market realities, including moderating inflation, changing central bank policies, and diverse yield opportunities, have led many investors and advisers to re-examine the enduring relevance of bonds in contemporary portfolios.

The Mechanics of Bonds: Income, Duration, and Market Forces

At their foundation, bonds are simply agreements: one party lends, another borrows, and regular coupon payments are set until maturity, when the principal is repaid. Yet the world of fixed income is richer and more complex. Bonds offer two key sources of returns—income through periodic interest (coupons), and capital gains or losses stemming from price changes, which are themselves functions of prevailing market rates and changing risk appetites.

A crucial concept here is duration. Duration is a measure of a bond’s sensitivity to changes in interest rates. When rates fall, the value of existing bonds typically rises, especially for those with longer durations. Conversely, rising rates can seesaw bond prices lower, particularly for those with extended maturities. As one recent Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) speech outlined, “Because bonds pay fixed coupons, their prices move inversely with prevailing yields... the magnitude of this effect is a function of duration, with longer-maturity bonds exhibiting greater price sensitivity.”

This inverse relationship is generally straightforward for high-quality government bonds that carry minimal credit

“No bond is entirely risk-free,” observes one recent commentator—a point frequently forgotten during bull runs or times of ultra-low yields. While government bonds remain popular as defensive assets, they are still exposed to interest rate and inflation risks.

risk. Yet, as highlighted in contemporary Firstlinks analysis, the storyline is different for credit-sensitive instruments. Corporate and high-yield bonds, for example, are not influenced solely by base rates; their pricing also responds to changes in perceived credit risk and broader economic conditions. As market conditions shift—through economic surprises, changes in monetary policy, or inflation shocks—these dynamics adjust the balance of risk and reward throughout the fixed income spectrum.

Understanding the variety within fixed income is vital. Investors may choose from cash-like short-term securities, highly liquid government issues, investment-grade corporates, high-yield or emerging-market bonds, and even complex structured finance. Each option comes with its own profile for risk, duration, return, and liquidity—building blocks that, when thoughtfully combined, create the diverse palette needed for robust portfolio construction.

Risk and Reward: Balancing Returns Across Market Cycles

“No bond is entirely risk-free,” observes one recent commentator—a point frequently forgotten during bull runs or times of ultra-low yields. While government bonds remain popular as defensive assets, they are still exposed to interest rate and inflation risks. As history reminded us in 2022, even government securities can lose value when monetary tightening drives yields higher or when inflation eats away at real returns.

Credit risk is another important theme. High-yield and emerging-market bonds may promise higher returns but carry greater risk of issuer default and can be more volatile, especially in uncertain periods. It is not just the coupon or yield that matters; what investors must assess is the underlying credit quality and the risk of not being repaid in challenging times.

The interplay between bonds and the overall macro-economic environment is pivotal. Fixed income tends to respond not only to central bank actions but also to inflation expectations, global growth, and currency fluctuations. Selectivity is crucial. “Credit spreads are narrower than average, suggesting limited compensation for credit risk in some segments. This highlights the importance of selectivity,

particularly in areas that may be vulnerable if growth slows or inflation reaccelerates,” another Firstlinks article noted.

Diversifying across maturities and sectors is now widely recognised as a prudent approach. A portfolio combining long-duration government bonds, shorter-term floating rate notes, and a measured allocation to higher-yielding credit can cushion shocks, capture opportunities, and adapt to evolving conditions. As bonds “respond to the path of growth, inflation and monetary policy,” the advisory role of professional asset managers becomes increasingly valuable, helping retail investors calibrate their exposures as the environment changes.

Diversification and Global Positioning

The 2025 landscape for fixed income investing is defined not only by what is happening domestically, but also by the forces at play around the globe. The appeal of diversification, both within Australia and through international markets, has never been stronger. As outlined in recent Firstlinks and RBA commentary, global bonds—particularly those issued in emerging markets—can provide diversification benefits that offset risks concentrated in any single region or sector.

Australian government and investment-grade corporate bonds continue to underpin many portfolios due to their liquidity and transparency. Yet international exposures, carefully selected to account for currency, credit, and country risk, provide another layer of risk mitigation. As the RBA noted, the structural maturity and institutional resilience of Australia’s bond market is an enduring advantage, but selective global positioning can add flexibility, potential for higher returns, and broader hedging capacity.

One key theme is that no single market or asset class dominates across all cycles. Just as equity performance rotates among sectors and regions, so too does fixed income. Factors such as central bank activity, policy direction, currency movements, and regional growth rates continually shift the opportunity set. This is why advisers increasingly emphasise a blended approach—balancing allocations between sovereigns, high-quality credit, and selectively higher-risk exposures at appropriate moments in the cycle.

All the while, market liquidity, transparency, and

By prioritising understanding over assumption, process over prediction, and balance over bravado, Australian investors and their advisers can ensure the evolving role of bonds continues to uphold its core promise: a steady hand through both calm and storm, tailored to the needs of each investor's unique journey.

operational risk should remain front of mind. Less-liquid markets or complex instruments can bring additional yield, but often at the cost of increased volatility and greater difficulty in quickly realising capital in times of need.

A New Perspective: Bonds in the Modern Portfolio

Today, viewing bonds as “ballast and opportunity”—rather than simply as safe havens—is central to building modern portfolios. Bonds have shown they can play multiple roles: stabilisers during equity drawdowns, reliable sources of income in low-growth or deflationary periods, and even tactical opportunities for capital gains in times of market stress or falling yields.

However, portfolio construction must now respect the nuances of correlation and liquidity. As one Firstlinks piece stressed, “the traditional 60/40 equity and bond allocation has long been considered a benchmark for balanced investing. The challenges of 2022... underscored the importance of re-examining this framework.” Rather than relying slavishly on old formulas, advisers are weighing up the relative merits of different assets, durations, and risk tolerances to create solutions that meet the unique needs of today's and tomorrow's investors.

Central to this perspective are several pragmatic lessons for the retail investor:

- Carefully understand the risk/return profile of each fixed income exposure.
- Don't chase yield without considering the possibility of capital losses.
- Use diversification—across issuers, regions, maturities, and currency—as both an offensive and defensive strategy.
- Maintain a balanced view of income needs, liquidity requirements, and growth aspirations.
- Seek professional guidance to update and adapt fixed income exposures as policy, markets, and personal circumstances evolve.

Active engagement and ongoing education are essential. Rather than see bonds as static or secondary, continue to assess their dynamic role in addressing both present risks and future opportunities. It is this balanced, reflective approach—not promotion or blanket caution—that will serve Australian investors best as portfolios continue to evolve.

Conclusion

As the world navigates a period of profound change marked by economic uncertainty, policy experimentation, and new investment paradigms, bonds continue to earn their place within diversified portfolios. The lessons of recent years have made clear there is no one-size-fits-all solution—but equally, the bond market remains an invaluable arena for managing risk, securing income, and laying the groundwork for future resilience.

By prioritising understanding over assumption, process over prediction, and balance over bravado, Australian investors and their advisers can ensure the evolving role of bonds continues to uphold its core promise: a steady hand through both calm and storm, tailored to the needs of each investor's unique journey.

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SUPERANNUATION WITHDRAWALS DEMYSTIFIED

HOW AND WHEN TO ACCESS YOUR RETIREMENT SAVINGS

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BY WEALTH ADVISER

Understanding when and how you can access your superannuation is one of the most important steps in preparing for retirement. The key lies in knowing the legal conditions of release, the tax rules attached to each withdrawal type, and the strategic decisions that can turn a lifetime of savings into a sustainable stream of income.

This article is designed to give clarity where confusion often reigns – explaining in plain language how Australians can legally and strategically withdraw their superannuation. It explores the rules that determine when access is permitted, the difference between lump sums and income streams, and how timing decisions affect tax, retirement income, and long-term financial security. By connecting the legal definitions of retirement with practical withdrawal choices, the discussion aims to help readers turn their super from a static account balance into a flexible, well-managed source of retirement income.

Retirement as a Legal Condition, Not a Stage of Life

Julie Steed's *When You Can Withdraw Your Super* reminds readers that "the superannuation definitions of retirement will differ from many members' plain English understanding

of retirement." Under superannuation law, the right to withdraw savings arises only when one of several **conditions of release** is satisfied—chiefly, **retirement after preservation age** or **turning 65**, whichever comes first.

From **1 July 2024**, the preservation age is **60** for all members. A person is regarded as retired if they have ceased gainful employment and have no intention to return to any work of ten hours per week or more, or have simply ended one employment arrangement after turning 60. Full access is automatic once the member reaches 65, regardless of work status.

Steed's case studies highlight how critical the "termination" concept is. In one example, *Philip*, 62, ended a temporary by-election role—legally satisfying a release condition for all super accrued to that date. By contrast, *Joel*, 60, reduced his hours but remained on his employer's books, meaning he had not met a genuine retirement condition. Accessing funds in such a scenario would constitute **illegal early withdrawal**.

Planned October 2025 Reforms: Streamlining Access and Oversight

Government announcements in October 2025 introduced proposals to simplify access distinctions and strengthen compliance monitoring. These updates—collectively

Beginning a super income stream means transferring funds into a retirement phase account where investment earnings are tax free. Minimum annual payments, calculated as a set percentage of the account balance (starting at 4 per cent under 65), must be withdrawn each year.

dubbed the **Superannuation Withdrawal Rule Refresh**, effective 20 October 2025 (subject to final ATO and Treasury implementation)—aim to unify fund reporting and reduce misclassified early releases.

Key features as currently framed include:

- **Enhanced digital verification** of identity and employment status through the MyGov-ATO link.
- **Revised hardship criteria** allowing limited annual withdrawals (up to \$25 000) for verified severe hardship or medical emergencies.
- **Penalty regime updates** of up to 22 per cent tax on unauthorised early withdrawals below preservation age.
- **Greater transparency** around fund-to-ATO data sharing to detect non-compliant early access.

While these measures are not yet legislative law, Treasury has signalled implementation through the 2025-26 Budget compliance track.

Pension Mode: Turning Super Savings into Income

Once eligible, members typically choose between taking a lump sum or setting up an income stream. According to the ATO (2025), retirees “can usually choose to withdraw super as a lump sum, income stream, or combination of both,” with tax effects varying accordingly.

Beginning a super income stream means transferring funds into a retirement phase account where investment earnings are tax free. Minimum annual payments, calculated as a set percentage of the account balance (starting at 4 per cent under 65), must be withdrawn each year. Failure to meet these minimums causes the account to lose its tax-free pension status for that year.

From age 60, all withdrawals from a taxed source are tax-free, and income offsets continue to apply for untaxed elements (15 per cent for taxed components; 10 per cent for untaxed components). Earnings from lump-sum reinvestments outside super revert to normal investment taxation.

With the transfer balance cap fixed at \$1.9 million since July 2023, transferring more than this total into pension accounts triggers an excess transfer balance tax. This makes fine-tuning between accumulation and pension accounts a vital step in adviser-led strategy.

Transition-to-Retirement (TTR): Controlled Flexibility

For Australians aged 60 or over but still employed, the transition-to-retirement income stream offers limited access. The ATO confirms that a TTR allows withdrawal of between 4 and 10 per cent of the account balance each financial year until full retirement or age 65.

AustralianSuper notes that members often use a TTR to “reduce working hours without reducing income, or continue working while salary-sacrificing to build super faster.” It remains a non-commutable income stream, meaning lump-sum cashing isn’t permitted until a full condition of release—such as retirement or turning 65—is met.

Once retirement status is achieved (called nil cashing restriction), the TTR automatically converts to a retirement phase pension, lifting earnings into the tax-free environment.

Sustainable Withdrawals and the 4 Per Cent Rule

Supercharging the 4 Per Cent Rule expands on how retirees can maintain steady income while guarding against sequencing and inflation risk. “The rule isn’t about a fixed percentage but a disciplined withdrawal rate adjusting with markets and spending needs,” notes author James Gruber.

Australian planners now typically model between 3.5 and 4.5 per cent annual drawdowns, adjusted upward in strong market years and pared back amid volatility. Aligning withdrawals with market cycles and tax conditions helps preserve capital longevity.

ATO guidance supports this planning flexibility: withdrawals can be increased, paused, or partially commuted, subject to the fund’s governing rules and minimum payment obligations.

Sequencing, Tax, and Centrelink Interactions

Strategic withdrawal planning can materially influence long-term tax and Age Pension outcomes:

- **Use tax-free super income first** once eligible, preserving taxable investments for later years.
- **Coordinate with the Age Pension assets and income tests;** premature drawdowns may lower entitlements.
- **Manage taxable vs tax-free components**—withdrawals are

always proportionate, so known contribution history aids optimisation.

- **Stagger lump-sum withdrawals** to remain under annual hardship or reform-imposed limits once new rules commence.

Couples commonly apply the re-contribution strategy: one partner withdraws and re-contributes funds to even out account balances for future tax and estate planning efficiency.

Avoiding Early-Access Pitfalls

Early-access breaches remain a significant risk. As Julie Steed illustrates, members often “intend to retire” yet maintain casual employment, invalidating their release. The ATO stresses that until a formal end-to-employment arrangement occurs—or the individual turns 65—withdrawal outside approved conditions is illegal, taxable, and may incur additional penalties.

Common triggers of unintentional breaches include:

- Reducing hours instead of formally ceasing employment.
- Taking partial lump sums under 60 without hardship grounds.
- Misreporting income streams that haven’t transitioned to retirement phase.

Professional confirmation from a licensed adviser or the fund itself should always precede any withdrawal instructions.

Preparing for the Reforms

To prepare for the October 2025 reforms and ensure compliance with existing ATO law:

1. Verify your employment termination status and preservation age.
2. Review MyGov-linked fund details to confirm personal eligibility and digital identity verification.
3. Update contribution timing—no new contributions can be made to a pension account after commencement.

4. Model drawdowns using adviser tools reflecting inflation, life expectancy, and market variability.
5. Seek regulated financial advice to align withdrawal sequencing with lifestyle, estate, and Age Pension goals.

The Modern Meaning of Withdrawal

Retirement today is less about leaving the workforce entirely and more about re-ordering priorities. As *Why a Traditional Retirement May Be Pushed Back 25 Years* argues, Australians are working longer by choice and necessity, using superannuation flexibly across multi-stage retirements.

The central challenge is converting balances into reliable, inflation-adjusted income while staying within rule boundaries. With the right guidance, the evolving Australian system provides the tools to do just that—structured freedom with secure footing.

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Q&A: Ask a Question

Question 1:

I've been earning more recently, but it never feels like I'm getting ahead financially. How can I make my extra income work harder for me?

It's a common feeling, spending can quietly rise with income, leaving little left over despite earning more. The key is being intentional. Start by reviewing your cash flow to understand where your money goes and set clear saving and investment goals. Automated savings plans or regular investment contributions can help redirect surplus income before it disappears into lifestyle creep.

Think about your priorities, paying down high-interest debt, topping up super contributions, or investing in diversified funds for long-term growth. Even modest, consistent amounts can compound powerfully over time. Aligning these steps with a structured plan ensures you're not just earning more but building wealth. A financial adviser can help create a strategy that balances your lifestyle today with your financial goals of tomorrow.

Question 2:

With the market at all-time highs, I've had some strong investment returns lately. How do I know if my portfolio needs changes to manage risk?

If shares have surged, you might now hold more growth assets than intended, increasing your exposure to risk. You may need to adjust this through rebalancing, which means adjusting your investments back to your original mix after markets have shifted in performance.

Balancing your investments helps maintain the right level of diversification aligned with your goals and comfort

with volatility. Many investors review their portfolio once or twice a year or when allocations drift 5-10% from target. This can involve trimming appreciated assets and reinvesting in those that underperformed.

While rebalancing can feel counterintuitive, it locks in gains and promotes long-term discipline. Before making changes, it's important to weigh tax implications and consider transaction costs. An adviser can help identify when and how to rebalance strategically, keeping your investments aligned with your personal risk profile and long-term plan.

Question 3:

My super fund says insurance terms are changing. Should I review my insurance in super?

Many super funds will have updates to their insurance pricing and cover, with new definitions and adjusted premium rates. These changes may alter what you're covered for, how much protection you have, or the cost deducted from your balance.

Insurance in super can be affordable and easy to manage, but it's not always tailored to your personal needs. Life changes such as taking on a mortgage, having children, or nearing retirement can mean your current level of insurance no longer fits your situation. Super funds also generally offer group insurance, which can be cheaper and easier to obtain but less tailored than retail cover, which is individually underwritten and can provide more flexible and superior benefits and definitions.

Reviewing your cover ensures protection levels and beneficiaries remain appropriate. Your adviser can help you check whether your insurance aligns with your broader financial plan, compare options between funds if needed, and confirm that your super's insurance continues to provide value and peace of mind.