

Hardship Policy

Version No	3
Approved By	Board
Approval Date	09/2021
Next Review Date	09/2022

Purpose

Westernport Water recognises that any customer may experience, to varying degrees, a period of financial difficulty during their lifetime. We acknowledge our social responsibility to assist vulnerable and hardship customers fairly, respectfully and with dignity.

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Assist customers to manage their ongoing water and wastewater costs and payments
- Ensure customers have access to essential water services
- Ensure that debt recovery actions do not add to the customer's burden
- Build customer awareness of the assistance and support services that Westernport Water provides
- Provide customers a pathway to account independence on an ongoing, sustainable basis.

The policy applies to both residential and commercial customers as, in recent years, COVID-19 has financially impacted customers from all property types.

Application

A customer experiencing financial hardship is someone who has been identified by themselves, Westernport Water, or by an independent accredited financial counsellor, as having the intention to pay, but not the financial capacity to make the required payments. The customer or individual could be experiencing one or more of these factors:

- Reliance on government assistance or Centrelink payments (e.g. pension, unemployment)
- Medical illness or mental health of the customer/individual or a dependant, affecting their capacity to pay
- Physical or intellectual disability of the customer/individual or dependant, affecting their capacity to pay
- Change in the family unit affecting capacity to pay
- Current and long-term financial situation may be vulnerable
- Experiencing family violence
- Sudden loss of income or substantial reduction in income
- Natural calamity such as fire, flood or storm damage.

Water supply will not be restricted and no legal action or additional debt recovery costs applied, while the customer is engaging with the Hardship Officer.

Westernport Water provides customers with a confidential service and will be proactive in identifying and addressing customers who are experiencing payment difficulties.

Hardship Assistance and Support

Water Concessions (Residential)

The Victorian Government provides concessions to residential customers to make water services more affordable for low-income households in Victoria. Eligible concession card holders can have 50 per cent deducted automatically from their water bill for water and sewerage charges up to a yearly maximum. A water account holder must hold one of the following eligible cards: Pensioner Concession Card; Health Care Card; or Veterans' Affairs Gold Card.

Utility Relief Grants (Residential)

The Utility Relief Grant Scheme is provided by the Victorian Government to help residential hardship customers pay their water bill in the event of a temporary financial crisis. Eligible customers need to hold a Pensioner Concession Card; Health Care Card; or Veterans' Affairs Gold Card and meet one of the following four criteria:

- had a recent substantial decrease in income
- had high unexpected costs for essential items
- cost of shelter is more than 30% of household income
- have experienced family violence

A grant can only be given once every two years and is capped at \$650.00.

Hardship Grants (Residential)

Hardship grants provide assistance to residential customers experiencing financial hardship due to extenuating circumstances. Grants are available to residential customers on a case-by-case basis provided they meet our hardship criteria.

Hardship grants may be requested by the customer or proactively applied by Westernport Water. The purpose of hardship grants is to reduce increasing customer debt where there is demonstrable effort to engage with Westernport Water to manage their account, despite hardship.

Westernport Water may also proactively apply one-off hardship grants as a goodwill gesture to accounts where a customer has maintained a sustained payment plan to manage and/or reduce their account balance.

Hardship grants are applied to accounts as per limits set out in the Delegations Manual.

In the event a Westernport Water staff member applies for a Hardship Grant as a customer, the request will be assessed and, if they are eligible, approved by both the Hardship Officer and Customer Relations Manager.

Payment Extensions (Residential and Commercial)

Westernport Water accepts payment extensions for periods of up to 21 days past the original due date, but can be longer depending upon individual circumstances.

Payment Arrangements (Residential and Commercial)

Short and long-term payment plans are offered to customers in accordance with a customer's capacity to pay. All payment arrangements are confirmed in writing within 10 days.

Direct Debit (Residential and Commercial)

Direct debit arrangements can be set up to pay quarterly accounts in full or to support pre-established flexible payment plans. This payment method can assist with budgeting.

Centrepay (Residential)

Centrepay is an option that customers can utilise via Centrelink. This allows the customer to have set payments automatically deducted from their Centrelink benefits and paid directly to Westernport Water. This service is at no cost to the customer and is ideal for customers who are on limited income who prefer to budget and pay by instalments.

Easyway (Residential)

Easyway payment plans are available for customers who wish to pay their accounts in regular instalments. This enables customers to budget according to their chosen payment frequency and avoid lump sum payments. An Easyway payment card is sent to the customer and can be used at Westernport Water's office and any Australia Post office.

Water Efficiency

Westernport Water provides customers with access to a range of information on how to reduce water usage and improve water efficiency. Residential customers in hardship will also benefit from relevant government water efficiency programs, which may include customer rebates for household improvements.

Debt Recovery

Participation in Westernport Water's hardship program is a joint effort between Westernport Water and the customer. Customers who make every effort to engage with Westernport Water will be supported through our program and protected from supply restriction, legal action and debt recovery costs, including accrued interest.

Whilst in the hardship program, customers are expected to:

- Make every effort to be as water efficient as possible, as this will assist in reducing the customers' future bills and debt.
- Adhere to agreed payment plans that have been based on their capacity to pay.
- Communicate with us and update us on their situation, particularly when they are unable to make payments.
- Seek advice from a financial counsellor, when recommended by Westernport Water.

In the following circumstances, customers will be exited from the hardship program:

- Customers who have been successful in achieving water account independence will be exited from the program.
- Customers who do not demonstrate genuine efforts to make payments in accordance with the agreed payment plan, manage their water usage and/or communicate with us, risk being exited from the program and placed into our normal debt recovery cycle.
- Customers who have been exited from the program on two previous occasions due to lack of compliance may be refused re-entry into the program.

Responsible Officer

Policy Owner – General Manager, Customer and Community
Responsible Policy Officer - Manager, Customer Relations