

# Financial Hardship Policy for Water Services

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Water Corporation

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## Policy statement

We recognise that financial hardship can be experienced by anyone. Customers impacted by financial hardship may find it difficult to pay for a variety of reasons, but regardless of their circumstances, all customers will be treated with fairness and compassion.

We do our best to work with our customers to find an appropriate, realistic and effective payment solution.

## Purpose

We understand it can be difficult to ask for support, so be assured we will treat your situation sensitively and respectfully.

This policy outlines the minimum standards Water Corporation (“our”, “we” or “us”) will apply to assist a residential customer (“you”) who does not have the capacity to pay their account due to financial hardship.

The policy provides guidance to employees, customers and stakeholders. If you are experiencing financial hardship, our main aim is to ensure:

- You engage with us early to identify hardship.
- You are treated with fairness, integrity and confidentiality and your personal information is kept confidential.
- You will be provided with a range of flexible options tailored to meet your individual needs.
- You will receive assistance and are encouraged to proactively manage your account.
- You will receive the most appropriate solution to meet your needs once contacting Water Corporation directly or via a financial counsellor.
- You are provided with information and advice on concession eligibility, water efficiency and the relevant support programs available.
- Once you’ve engaged with us, you are protected from additional overdue debt actions such as supply restriction, referral to mercantile agents, legal action and associated costs.

The policy does not apply to non-residential customers, though we encourage any customer experiencing financial hardship to contact us as soon as possible to explore payment options.

Being in financial hardship can be difficult, and we understand that. We will work toward finding a solution that will help with your account, keep your water flowing and pay for what you use.

All options referred to in this policy are available to the owner being the person liable for all charges for the property. We are continually looking for ways to support tenants. For this support to occur, tenants will need to be registered to receive water use bills as authorised by the owner.

## Definitions

Term	Definition
<b>Customer</b>	<p>A “customer” is defined as a person to whom water services are provided by Water Corporation or who is entitled to the provision of water services by Water Corporation, being –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) an owner of the land in respect of which the water services are provided; or</li> <li>b) an occupier of the land in respect of which the water services are provided.</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Liability</b>	<p>Under Section 126 of the Water Services Act 2012, the land owner is liable for all charges.</p>
<b>HUGS</b>	<p>Hardship Utility Grants Scheme (HUGS) is a State Government scheme that assists Western Australian utility customers who are in financial hardship and are unable to pay their utility bills.</p>
<b>Financial Hardship</b>	<p>“Financial hardship” is defined as a customer in an ongoing state of financial disadvantage in which the ability of the customer to meet their basic living needs, or those of a dependant of the customer, would be adversely affected if the customer were to pay an outstanding amount.</p>
<b>Payment difficulties</b>	<p>“Payment difficulties” is defined as being in a state of financial disadvantage that is not likely to be ongoing and in which the customer is unable to pay an outstanding amount.</p>

## What is financial hardship?

We recognise that financial hardship can be experienced by anyone. Customers impacted by financial hardship may find it difficult to pay for a variety of reasons, but regardless of their circumstances, all customers will be treated with fairness and compassion. We do our best to work with our customers to find an appropriate, realistic and effective payment solution.

You are considered to be in financial hardship if paying your water account will affect your ability to meet your basic living needs. In short, if you have the intention but not the financial capacity to pay.

Financial hardship may be caused by:

- insufficient income or loss of your (or a family member's) primary income
- separation or divorce from your partner
- loss of a partner or loved one
- family or domestic violence
- physical or mental health problems
- a chronic medical condition
- budget management difficulties because of a low income
- mortgage stress
- natural disaster such as bushfire, flood or cyclone
- other unforeseen factors affecting your capacity to pay, such as an increase in non-discretionary spending.

## Temporary financial hardship

Customers experience payment difficulties due to a sudden and/or temporary change in circumstances that adversely affect their finances. These customers generally require flexibility. We can assist by offering an extension of time to pay or a payment plan.

## Identifying customers in financial hardship

If you think you are experiencing financial hardship or are having difficulty paying your account, we encourage you to contact us as soon as possible. If your situation has been assessed by a financial counsellor, they can contact us on your behalf.

The following are considered when determining financial hardship:

- the customer requests information about alternative payment arrangements
- the customer's payment history indicates they have had difficulty paying accounts in the past
- the customer has had a change of circumstances that adversely affects their finances
- eligibility for government-funded concessions
- the customer is eligible or has previously applied (successfully or unsuccessfully) for the government-funded Hardship Utilities Grant Scheme (HUGS)
- advice has been received from a financial counsellor
- total income after tax (take home pay)
- the number of children or dependants involved
- current financial commitments including any existing debt
- medical conditions or disability impacting earning capacity
- family or domestic violence.

Although the above list displays indicators of possible hardship, each customer is treated with sensitivity and understanding according to their individual circumstance.

We will assess whether we consider you to be in financial hardship within five business days.

If we cannot make our assessment in five business days, we will refer you to a financial counsellor for assessment.

Following your financial counselling assessment, we will consider any information provided by you and your financial counsellor, including your payment history. This will assist to determine eligibility for our Financial Care programs and we will advise you of the outcome.

All your information is treated as confidential and is subject to our privacy provisions, as described in our Privacy Policy which can be found at [watercorporation.com.au/privacy](http://watercorporation.com.au/privacy)

## Family violence

We actively support customers affected by family violence. Our Family Violence Policy is in place to ensure the community is safe and supported. We understand the traumatic nature of family violence and want our customers to know they will be heard and treated with compassion. Be assured:

- Our employees are trained on how to respond and offer support.
- A family violence support officer will be appointed to ensure that you only need to tell us once, and all account, personal information and interactions are restricted to maintain your confidentiality.
- Information about support networks and access to financial hardship programs will be offered.
- Recovery action will not be taken on unpaid accounts.

For more information about our Family Violence Policy, visit [watercorporation.com.au/fvpolicy](http://watercorporation.com.au/fvpolicy)

## Payment plans

If we identify that you are experiencing financial hardship, we will offer you more time to pay. A payment plan is an agreement between you and us where we receive a certain amount of money in regular instalments over an agreed timeframe. We do not charge any fees or interest as part of your extension or payment plan.

When setting the conditions of the payment plan, we will involve you and your financial counsellor and consider how much you can afford to pay, and, if relevant, your water consumption history.

We will offer our assistance for future bills, during the payment plan, understanding your payment arrangement may be for a period that includes new bills.

## Tenants

Tenants registered to receive water use bills can contact us directly to discuss options when experiencing payment difficulties. We will negotiate a proposed payment plan with you and notify the owner of the proposed plan on your behalf, as their consent is required for the plan to proceed. We can also provide you with assistance and information on ways to manage future water use bills.

## Owners

On request, we will issue water use bills to either your nominated property manager or tenant. By authorising a tenant to receive water use bills, you also authorise us to discuss matters in relation to the water use bills directly with them.

This does not affect your liability for the charges. Where the water use bill is sent to anyone other than the owner and remains unpaid, formal recovery action will commence against the owner.

If you are having payment difficulties or in financial hardship, please contact us to discuss solutions. If your tenant is registered to receive water use bills and contacts us to request assistance with water use charges, we will inform you of the proposed plan for your consent.

If you're aware your tenant is experiencing payment difficulties or financial hardship, we encourage you to suggest they contact us to discuss payment options.

## Debt reduction and collection

If you are experiencing financial hardship, we will consider reducing the amount you owe to us. In addition, we will not commence or continue proceedings to recover your debt:

- while we are assessing if you are experiencing financial hardship or payment difficulties
- if you are complying with your payment plan or another arrangement you have with us
- if you have made a complaint to Water Corporation or the Energy and Water Ombudsman.

If you do not maintain your payment plan or other arrangements, we may commence debt recovery proceedings.

When collecting your debt, we will comply with Part 2 of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) debt collection guidelines for collectors and creditors ([accc.gov.au/about-us/publications/debt-collection-guideline-for-collectors-and-creditors](https://www.accc.gov.au/about-us/publications/debt-collection-guideline-for-collectors-and-creditors)).

We may partner with a debt collection agency if debt remains outstanding. Additional fees may apply in this case.

Prior to referring your account to a debt collection agency, we will proactively contact you to discuss your individual circumstance. We will review and revise.

## Restricting and restoring your water flow

We will not reduce the rate of flow of your supply of water in the following cases:

- while we are assessing if you are in financial hardship
- if you have been identified by us as experiencing payment difficulties or financial hardship and you are complying with your payment plan or another arrangement you have with us.

If we do restrict the supply of water to you, we will provide a flow sufficient for health and hygiene purposes.

We will restore the water supply when the amount owing is paid or you enter into a mutually-agreed payment arrangement.

We will not cut off the water supply to an occupied residence.



## Useful information

**Concessions** – you may be eligible for a concession if you hold a Pensioner or State Concession Card, Commonwealth Seniors Health Card with a WA Seniors Card. For further information on eligibility criteria, visit [watercorporation.com.au/concessions](http://watercorporation.com.au/concessions)

**Financial Care** – our Financial Care suite of programs are designed for customers who require a greater level of assistance. For a comprehensive list of benefits and eligibility criteria, visit [watercorporation.com.au/billhelp](http://watercorporation.com.au/billhelp)

**Financial counsellors** – provide confidential and independent information, support and advocacy at no cost to help you take control of your financial situation. We can refer you to a financial counsellor in your area or you can make direct contact by visiting [fcawa.org](http://fcawa.org) to locate your nearest financial counsellor. If you are unable to visit a face-to-face financial counsellor in person, you can call the National Debt Helpline on 1800 007 007.

**Financial relief** – the Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (HUGS) assists Western Australian utility customers who are in financial hardship and are unable to pay their utility bills. The purpose of HUGS is to assist customers in financial hardship with their connection to essential services.

HUGS is only available to owner occupiers of residential properties. Tenants are not eligible for HUGS to pay outstanding water consumption charges. For eligibility criteria, please contact us.

**Payment options** – you can pay your bill by Centrepay, internet, direct debit, telephone, mail or POST Billpay. Centrepay is only available to customers who receive Centrelink payments.

Paying by Centrepay may help you manage your bills more easily, as your bills will be paid via regular deductions. For more information on payment methods, please refer to your bill or visit [watercorporation.com.au/billenquiries](http://watercorporation.com.au/billenquiries)

**Redirection of bills** – you can nominate to have your bill redirected at no charge to a third party or an alternative postal address.

**WA Connect** – a directory of community service providers managed by the DropIN team at the Western Australian Council of Social Service. It contains real-time search results of emergency relief services, with phone numbers, operating hours, and directions on the services available.

Users can search for food relief, financial counsellors, and emergency accommodation, among other services, and get a list of services that can provide assistance in the location that is convenient. WA Connect is a free directory for service providers, and people looking for assistance. For more information, visit [wacconnect.org.au](http://wacconnect.org.au)

**Water Corporation staff** - our employees deal with all matters with sensitivity and understanding. We ensure they are fully trained in:

- the range of payment options and methods available
- this Financial Hardship Policy, procedures and work instructions
- government-funded concession entitlements
- government and community programs/services
- privacy requirements.

To ensure the desired standard is maintained, staff performance is assessed by monitoring customer interactions. In addition:

- We engage with stakeholders in the development and review of training programs.
- We provide training to new staff and schedule refresher courses where appropriate.

## Working with us

If you are experiencing financial hardship, please contact us as soon as possible to discuss your situation. We offer a variety of options and ask that you:

- keep us informed of any changes in your circumstances
- agree and maintain a suitable payment arrangement
- contact us to request an alternative arrangement if you are having difficulty maintaining the agreed payment plan
- contact a financial counsellor or relevant consumer representative if requested. It is important you discuss your financial situation with a financial counsellor or a person from a relevant consumer representative organisation and consider the options available
- minimise water use.

## Complaints handling

We are committed to resolving issues as quickly as possible. For more information about our complaints handling process, visit [watercorporation.com.au/mediation](http://watercorporation.com.au/mediation)

You can let us know about your complaint by:

- speaking with our Customer Experience Team
  - about your account: 13 13 85 (8am – 5pm weekdays, except public holidays)
  - about your water service: 13 13 75 (24 hours, seven days a week)
- using our online form at [watercorporation.com.au/feedback](http://watercorporation.com.au/feedback)
- writing to us: Locked bag 2, Osborne Park Delivery Centre, WA 6916.

For speech or hearing assistance call the National Relay Service 133 677 or if English isn't your first language call the telephone interpreter service 13 14 50 and request 13 13 85 for accounts or 13 13 75 for water service issues.

If your complaint isn't resolved internally or you are unhappy with the outcome, you may refer your complaint to the Energy & Water Ombudsman. The Energy & Water Ombudsman will investigate your complaint and may mediate the dispute.

**Address:** Energy and Water Ombudsman Western Australia, PO Box Z5386, St Georges Terrace, Perth WA 6831

**Phone:** (08) 9220 7588 or 1800 754 004 (toll free for country callers)

**Email:** [energyandwater@ombudsman.wa.gov.au](mailto:energyandwater@ombudsman.wa.gov.au)

For further information on the Energy and Water Ombudsman complaint process and matters they can and cannot investigate, please visit [ombudsman.wa.gov.au](http://ombudsman.wa.gov.au)

## **Application of this policy**

The Head of Customer Billing Operations is responsible for the strategic direction, operation and management of our Financial Hardship Policy and associated programs, including monitoring the effectiveness of the policy. All employees who assist customers having financial difficulties are required to be aware of this policy and the options available to assist them.

## **Approval and review**

Only material amendments to this policy will be approved by the Economic Regulation Authority.

This policy will be reviewed at least every five years to ensure it meets the needs of customers experiencing financial hardship and remains relevant. The review will incorporate the views and recommendations of our stakeholders.

We will ensure procedures and work instructions are reviewed and maintained to ensure our interactions with customers experiencing financial hardship are conducted in a sensitive manner according to the guidelines set in this policy.