

# **Residential Hardship Policy**

**July 2009**

**Southern Water**



## RESIDENTIAL HARDSHIP POLICY

### 1. Introduction

Southern Water (the *Corporation*) recognises residential customers may experience times of financial hardship due to changes in circumstances beyond their control. The *Hardship Policy* affirms the *Corporation's* commitment to helping customers who have the intent, but not the capacity to make payments in accordance with the terms outlined on water and wastewater accounts.

The *Hardship Policy* is supported by a *Customer Assistance Program* providing a range of payment and assistance options so customers may stay connected to their water and wastewater services.

### 2. Values Underpinning this Policy

This *Hardship Policy* is based on the following values:

- All customers will be treated with dignity and respect;
- All customers will be treated in a non-judgmental way;
- All customers will be assisted to meet their financial commitments to the Corporation in a supportive environment; and
- By our actions we will not add to our customer's burden.

### 3. Who does this policy aim to help?

The *Corporation* believes there are two types of financial hardship; long term and temporary. Depending on the type of hardship being experienced, customers will have different needs requiring different solutions.

Customers in long-term financial hardship may need ongoing assistance.

Customers who are in temporary financial hardship due to a sudden change in circumstances such as ill health, unemployment or other short term financial difficulty may require one-off assistance such as an extension of time or a flexible payment arrangement.

This policy also allows for customers on low or fixed incomes who wish to make small regular payments in line with their personal budgets.

Commercial and tradewaste customers should contact our customer service staff to discuss difficulties they may be having with their accounts. Support may be provided on a case by case basis.

#### **4. How are customers facing financial hardship identified?**

The *Corporation* aims to be proactive to ensure financial difficulty is recognised early in the credit cycle and extends the *Hardship Policy* to those who are identified either by themselves, by the *Corporation* or an independent financial counselor.

To ensure that customers are aware of the *Hardship Policy* and how to access the *Customer Assistance Program*, details of the policy and contact details will appear on all accounts, reminders and final notices. It will also be a regular feature in *Corporation* newsletters to customers, appear on the *Corporation's* website and a brochure promoting the *Customer Assistance Program* will be provided to all new customers as part of a new customer pack. The *Hardship Policy* and the *Customer Assistance Program* are outlined in the *Interim Standards of Customer Service* on our website and will be available on request.

The *Corporation* identifies customers facing financial hardship through its billing process and a customer's payment history. It recognises that customers may find it difficult to make the first step to ask for assistance therefore all final notices will be accompanied by a *Customer Assistance Program* brochure. In addition, prior to restriction/disconnection of the water supply, the customer service team will endeavour to contact the customer by phone to discuss the *Customer Assistance Program* options.

The *Corporation* also accepts referrals from an external body such as an independent accredited financial counselor.

#### **5. The *Corporation's* commitment to its customers experiencing financial hardship**

Any customer experiencing financial hardship will:

- Be treated respectfully, sensitively and without judgment;
- Have their case individually considered and their circumstances kept confidential;
- Receive prompt information on options for alternative payment arrangements, concessions and other government financial assistance programs;
- Nominate an amount they can afford to pay on an arrangement plan;
- Choose from various payment methods and receive written confirmation of the agreed payment arrangement within 14 days;
- Re-negotiate the amount of their installment if there is a change in their circumstances;
- Receive information about free, independent and accredited financial counselling services;
- Have access to a language interpreter service at no cost;
- Not have their water supply restricted/disconnected as long as they have agreed to a payment arrangement and are meeting it;

- Be shielded from legal action and additional debt recovery costs by the Corporation whilst they continue to make payments in accordance with the agreed schedule, or an agreed altered schedule of payments;
- Speak directly with a Customer Assistance Program officer in order to re-negotiate the payment arrangement if a payment is missed or likely to be missed;
- Be advised about how to reduce usage to assist in reducing future charges;
- Be advised of their right to lodge a complaint with Southern Water if the affordability issue is not resolved. Further, if the customer is not satisfied with the way the complaint has been handled they will be provided with information about external dispute resolution forums such as the Ombudsman Tasmania.

The *Corporation* will provide its customer service staff dealing with customers in hardship with ongoing training about the *Hardship Policy* to ensure they are aware of the policy values, able to engage with customers sensitively and are informed about the options available under the *Customer Assistance Program* so that they can assist customers to stay connected to their water and wastewater services.

## **6. Customer Assistance Program**

The *Corporation* offers a range of assistance methods and programs including:

- Payment options
- Advice on concessions and other government assistance
- Water conservation advice to lower water accounts; and
- A referral service so that customers may access further help.

### **6.1. Payment options**

- Flexible Payment Options - An agreed, affordable payment plan worked out in conjunction with the customer service team allows customers to spread out payment of the water account to suit individual needs over a 12-month period.
- Installment plans - Customers may negotiate to pay a water account by affordable installments. Options include Centrepay or a direct debit arrangement from a bank account that allows convenient payment on an account in full or by installments.
- Payment extension - Customers may apply for a payment extension of an agreed amount of time before the payment-in-full falls due.
- Deferment – Deferment of the due date for account payment is an option available when a customer has a short-term financial problem, that may be resolved in the near future but the customer is considered to be in necessitous circumstances e.g. where the customer is unemployed but will be returning to the workforce shortly.

- Waivers and incentives – a waiver may be made in special cases. Any relief through waiving tariffs and charges either in full or in part, when a household is suffering financial hardship, must be in the interest of the reasonable financial management of the household and to enable the household to meet the Corporation’s charges in the future. Waivers of arrears may be applied as:
  - A single one-off amount, or
  - As an incentive, matching payment/s made by the customer e.g. if a payment arrangement is in place and five installment payments are received by the agreed due dates then the amount of one installment may be waived from the outstanding amount.
- Reductions – a reduction within financial delegation limits may be made in certain circumstances. A reduction is a one-off situation for a defined period.
- High unexpected volume charges due to hard to detect leaks or occasions of civil emergency – where a high unexpected volume charge is the result of a bona fide hard to detect leak, a waiver of a portion of the additional charge may be made in accordance with the provisions within the Corporation’s financial delegation limits.

## **6.2. Concessions**

The proposed, new concessions legislation, part of the water and sewerage reforms to provide guaranteed support to low income customers, has not been passed by Government at this time. Southern Water is preparing procedures and systems to ensure that it is able to apply concessions for eligible customers when the legislative change occurs.

## **6.3. Water Conservation**

Advice on saving water – free advice to help customers achieve a more water efficient home and garden so they may achieve a saving on their water account. This may include a water audit.

## **6.4. Referral assistance**

Access to further help includes:

- The Corporation can provide customers with a confidential and independent financial counseling service if needed at no cost; and
- Access to an interpreter service is available at no cost.

## 7. How to contact Southern Water

Accounts and Enquiries: 13MYWATER or 13 6992

24-hour Emergency Service: 13MYWATER or 13 6992

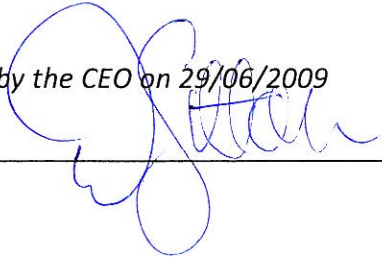
Postal Address: PO Box 1060  
**GLENORCHY TAS 7010**

Email: [info@southernwatertas.com.au](mailto:info@southernwatertas.com.au)

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*Approved by the CEO on 29/06/2009*

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'G. H. H.', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and somewhat cursive.