



Shire of Victoria Plains

Financial Hardship Policy
for Water Services

April 2014

Shire of Victoria Plains
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Calingiri WA 6569
Ph: (08) 9628 7004 Fax: (08) 9628 7008
Email: reception@victoriaplains.wa.gov.au
Web: www.victoriaplains.wa.gov.au

1 Purpose

This Financial Hardship Policy outlines how the Shire of Victoria Plains (“we”) will assist a residential customer (“you”) who cannot pay a rate notice because of financial hardship.

Our policy applies only to the water services portion of your rate notice.¹ Residential tenants who have agreed with the land owner to receive a rate notice are also covered by this policy.

If you are also having difficulty paying other charges on your rate notice or if you are a commercial customer, we encourage you to still talk to us.

We are committed to working with you to find an appropriate payment solution that works for both you and us. We understand that it can be difficult to ask for support, and will treat you sensitively and respectfully.

2 What is Financial Hardship?

You will be considered to be in financial hardship if paying the water services portion of your rate notice will affect your ability to meet your basic living needs² – in short, if you have the intention but not the financial capacity to pay.

Financial hardship may, for example, be caused by:

- loss of your or a family member’s primary income;
- spousal separation or divorce;
- loss of a spouse or loved-one;
- physical or mental health issues;
- a chronically ill child;
- budget management issues associated with a low income; and
- other unforeseen factors affecting your capacity to pay, such as a reduction in income or an increase in non-discretionary spending.

3 Identifying Customers in Financial Hardship

If you think you may be in financial hardship we encourage you to contact us as soon as possible. You may ask your financial counsellor to contact us on your behalf.

We will assess within three business days whether we consider you to be in financial hardship. If we cannot make our assessment within three business days, we will refer you to a financial counsellor for assessment.

¹ This is because the *Water Services Code of Conduct (Customer Service Standards) 2013* and our water licence only require us to have a hardship policy for any water services we provide to residential customers.

² Clause 19 of the *Water Services Code of Conduct (Customer Service Standards) 2013* defines financial hardship as “being in an ongoing state of financial disadvantage in which the customer’s ability to meet the basic living needs of the customer or a dependant of the customer would be adversely affected if the customer were to pay an unpaid bill for a water service supplied in respect of the place used solely or primarily as the customer’s dwelling”.

As part of our assessment we will consider any information provided by you and, if applicable, your financial counsellor. We will also take into account any information we may have on your payment history.

As soon as we have made our assessment, we will advise you of the outcome.

4 Payment Plans

If we determine that you are in financial hardship, we will offer you more time to pay the water services portion of your rate notice or a payment plan for this portion. We will not charge you any fees or interest as part of your extension or payment plan.

We will involve you and, if applicable, your financial counsellor in setting a payment plan. When setting the conditions of the plan, we will consider your capacity to pay and, if relevant, your usage needs.

If appropriate, we will review and revise your extension or payment plan.

We do not have to offer you a payment plan if you have had two payment plans cancelled because of non-payment.

If you are a tenant, we must make sure that the land owner is aware of us giving you an extension or entering into a payment plan with you before we do so. We can agree that you notify the land owner of the proposed extension or payment plan (and provide us with evidence that you have done so), or you can give us permission to notify the land owner.

5 Debt Reduction and Collection

If you are in financial hardship, we will consider reducing the amount you owe us.

We will also not commence or continue proceedings to recover your debt:

- while we are assessing whether or not you are in financial hardship; or
- if you are complying with your payment plan or another payment arrangement you have with us.

If you do not comply with your payment plan or other payment arrangement, we may commence debt recovery proceedings. When collecting your debt, we will comply with Part 2 of the ACCC and ASIC's Debt collection guidelines for collectors and creditors.

We may outsource your debt to a debt collection agency. Please be advised that additional fees may apply in this case. We will ensure that any debt collection agency we engage will comply with Part 2 of the ACCC and ASIC's Debt collection guidelines for collectors and creditors.

6 Useful Information

- **Redirection of rate notice:** We will advise you of your right to have your rate notice redirected to another person free of charge if you are absent or ill.
- **Payment options:** You may pay your rate notice by direct debit, Internet, Centrepay, telephone or post.

Paying by direct debit or Centrepay may help you manage your bills more easily as your bills will be paid through regular deductions.

- **Concessions and other financial relief and assistance:** It is possible that you may be eligible for a Centrelink Pensioner Concession Card and we may suggest that you contact Centrelink regarding applying for this Card. This Concession Card can provide between 25% to 50% rate reductions if eligible. Please note that the Shire staff do not and cannot assess you as being eligible to receive the Centrelink Pensioner Concession Card. We can only provide advice and it is Centrelink's staff who carry out this assessment.
- **Financial counselling:** We will advise you of any financial counselling services or other organisations that may be available to you.

Financial counsellors offer free, independent information to help you take control of your financial situation.

The Financial Counsellors' Association of WA (FCAWA) can refer you to a financial counsellor in your area. Alternatively, you can call the Financial Counselling Helpline. The Helpline provides a free confidential service for all Western Australians with financial problems and queries.

The FCAWA's contact details are:

Financial Counsellors' Association of WA
Phone: (08) 9325 1617
Email: afm@financialcounsellors.org
Website: www.financialcounsellors.org
Financial Counselling Helpline: 1800 007 007

- **Fees and charges:** We will charge you for the water services we provide to you.

We may charge you interest if you do not pay your rate notice by the due date.

A list of our fees and charges may be obtained from the Shire of Victoria Plains by phoning (08) 9628 7004.

7 Complaints Handling

If you have a complaint, please contact us first. Our contact details are included in section 9 below.

If you are not satisfied with the way we handle your complaint, you may refer your complaint to the Energy and Water Ombudsman. The Energy and Water Ombudsman will investigate your complaint and may mediate the dispute between you and us.

The Energy & Water Ombudsman's contact details are:

Company Name: Energy and Water Ombudsman Western Australia

In person: 2nd Floor, Albert Facey House
469 Wellington Street
Perth WA 6000

Postal Address: PO Box Z5386
St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6831

Phone: 08 9220 7588

Freecall: 1800 754 004*
* Calls made from mobile phones will be charged at the applicable rate.

TIS: Translating and Interpreting Service 131 450

TTY: National Relay Service 1800 555 727

E-mail: energyandwater@ombudsman.wa.gov.au

Fax: (08) 9220 7599

Freefax: 1800 611 279

8 Approval and review

Our policy was approved by the Economic Regulation Authority of WA.

We will review our policy at least every five years to ensure it remains up-to-date and relevant.

9 Our contact details

You can contact us at:

Shire of Victoria Plains
28 Cavell Street, Calingiri WA 6569
Phone: (08) 9628 7004
Fax: (08) 9628 7008
Email: reception@victoriaplains.wa.gov.au
Website: <http://www.victoriaplains.wa.gov.au>

TIS/TTY services: TTY If you are deaf, or have a hearing impairment or speech impairment, contact us through the National Relay Service www.relayservice.gov.au

TTY users phone 133 677 then ask for (08) 9628 7004

Speak and Listen users phone 1300 555 727 then ask for (08) 9628 7004

TIS: If you require an interpreter please telephone Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450.