

Financial Hardship Policy

Aim

TasWater recognises that residential customers may experience times of financial hardship due to changes in circumstances beyond their control. This Financial Hardship Policy affirms TasWater's commitment to helping customers who have the intent, but not the capacity, to make payment in accordance with the terms outlined on water and sewerage accounts.

Legislation

- *Water and Sewerage Industry Act 2008*
- *Water and Sewerage Industry (Customer Service Standards) Regulations 2009*

Definitions

Hardship Assistance Program means the program under which, subject to certain conditions, TasWater offers assistance to customers experiencing difficulties in meeting their financial obligations to TasWater.

Policy

This Financial 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 TasWater in a supportive environment.

How are customers facing financial hardship identified?

In accordance with the Customer Service Code, a customer is suffering financial hardship if:

- a) the customer occupies, as his or her principal place of residence, a property in respect of which the person is a customer of TasWater; and
- b) the customer, an accredited, independent financial institution, or an institution that provides, on a not-for-profit basis, assistance to persons experiencing financial difficulty, has notified TasWater that the customer is suffering financial hardship and is consequently having difficulty, or expects in the near future to have difficulty, in paying an amount of money specified in an account that is or may be issued by TasWater in relation to the property; and
- c) the customer would, but for financial hardship, pay the amount of money or amount of moneys that are, or may become, due and payable by the customer to TasWater.

TasWater may also identify a customer as experiencing potential hardship if:

- a) The customer has two or more unpaid accounts for their principal place of residence; or
- b) The customer has had supply restricted in the previous 12 months and failed to maintain regular payments; or
- c) The customer has difficulty meeting terms of an agreed payment arrangement; or
- d) The customer is a concession card holder in arrears.

TasWater will run periodic reviews of its database to proactively identify potential hardship by using the above criteria.

Eligibility

TasWater determines a customer's eligibility to enter the Hardship Assistance Program by using a range of objective criteria as indicators of financial hardship.

To be eligible to enter the program the customer must:

- 1) Occupy, as his or her principal place of residence, a property in respect of which the person is a customer of TasWater; and
- 2) Be experiencing difficulty, or expect in the near future to be experiencing difficulty, in paying an amount of money specified in an account that is or may be issued by TasWater in relation to the customer's principal place of residence and which the customer would, but for financial hardship, pay the amount of money that is, or may become, due and payable; and
- 3) Demonstrate a willingness to contribute to their account by:
 - a. making consistent part payments; and
 - b. maintaining contact with TasWater when experiencing payment difficulties; and
 - c. making an effort to maintain payment plans, agreed payment schedules or other payment commitments.

Circumstances which may contribute to a customer experiencing financial hardship may be short or long term in nature and may include:

- a. A sudden change in circumstances such as ill health, unemployment or other short term financial difficulty;
- b. Having an active residential account that cannot be paid before the next account is issued;
- c. Having a payment history that may indicate difficulty in meeting payment terms in the past;
- d. Having a low or fixed income; or
- e. Being in receipt of a state government concession.

TasWater understands that the above criteria are not exhaustive. A customer's individual circumstances will be considered when determining eligibility for entry into the Hardship Assistance Program.

TasWater may request information regarding a customer's financial capacity and information about the occupancy of customer's property and water usage in order to help determine the customer's capacity to pay. TasWater will also provide the customer with advice to help them achieve a more water efficient home and garden so they may achieve a saving on their water account.

TasWater's commitment to its customers experiencing financial hardship

To ensure that customers are aware of this Financial Hardship Policy, details will appear on customer accounts, reminders and final notices. The Financial Hardship Policy will also appear on TasWater's website and be available in hard copy on request.

Any customer experiencing financial hardship will:

- Be treated respectfully, sensitively and without judgment.
- Have their case individually considered by an appropriately trained TasWater staff member and their circumstances kept confidential.
- Receive prompt information on options for alternative payment arrangements, concessions and other government financial assistance programs.
- Be exempt from interest or other debt recovery fees whilst participating in the Hardship Assistance Program.
- Not have their water supply restricted, or be subject to legal action to recover any amounts owing by the customer to TasWater, whilst a customer is participating in the Hardship Assistance Program.
- Receive written confirmation of any alternative payment method within 10 business days of an agreement being reached between the customer and TasWater.
- Have the ability to re-negotiate the amount of their instalments if there is a change in their circumstances or if a payment is missed or likely to be missed.
- Receive free advice to help them achieve a more water efficient home and garden so they may achieve a saving on their water account.
- Receive information about free, independent and accredited financial counselling services.
- Have access to a language interpreter service at no cost.
- Be advised of their right to lodge a complaint with TasWater in accordance with TasWater's Complaints, Enquiries and Disputes Management Policy and, if appropriate, to raise the matter to Ombudsman Tasmania or another relevant external dispute resolution forum.

TasWater staff dealing with customers in financial hardship will receive ongoing training to ensure they are aware of the Financial Hardship Policy values, are able to engage with customers sensitively and are aware of all of the options available to customers under this Financial Hardship Policy.

TasWater will deliver concessions to eligible customers in accordance with the *Water and Sewerage Industry (Community Services Obligation) Act 2009*.

Assistance Options

Options available to customers in the Hardship Assistance Program may include:

- Extension of time to pay;
- An instalment plan tailored to the customer's individual circumstances including the arrears, capacity to pay and likely future consumption;
- Temporary deferment of charges (eg subject to sale of property); or
- Waiver of interest or other fees.

TasWater's expectations of customers

Whilst a customer is participating in the Hardship Assistance Program, TasWater expects the customer:

- To make payments in line with an agreed payment arrangement;

- To contact TasWater if a change in circumstance is experienced that impacts (or may impact) the ability of the customer to meet its obligations under an agreed payment arrangement;
- To contact TasWater when unable to make payments according to an agreed payment arrangement;
- To remain in regular contact with TasWater by responding to TasWater's attempts to contact the customer and advising of any change in the customer's contact details; and
- To participate in payment arrangement reviews and, if required, be open to an adjustment in the instalment amounts to reflect changes in consumption, or repayment of outstanding TasWater accounts.

If the customer does not comply with the above expectations, TasWater may withdraw any financial assistance being provided to the customer and remove them from the Hardship Assistance Program.

Exit from the Hardship Assistance Program

TasWater will attempt to contact customers who do not adhere to agreed payment arrangements. Where non-payment continues, or where attempts to contact are ignored, TasWater will withdraw the customer from the Hardship Assistance Program and resume standard debt recovery action.

Customers will receive written advice of TasWater's intention to take such action, and will be given a further period of time to contact TasWater prior to that action being taken.

Customers will also exit the Hardship Assistance Program when:

- The customer's account returns to a zero balance;
- The customer has regained control over the management of their account and is able to meet TasWater's normal payment terms; or
- The customer requests removal from the program.

Financial Hardship Policy review

In accordance with TasWater's Policy Framework, this Financial Hardship Policy and associated procedures will be reviewed at least once every 3 years or otherwise as appropriate (eg if there are relevant changes to the Tasmanian Water and Sewerage Industry Customer Service Code).

How to contact TasWater

Telephone:	13 6992
Accounts and Enquiries 8:30am – 5pm Monday to Friday:	13 6992
Postal Address:	GPO Box 1393 HOBART TAS 7001
Email:	enquiries@taswater.com.au
Internet:	www.taswater.com.au

Or in person at one of TasWater's Customer Service Centres – refer to the website for current locations.

Responsibilities

The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for implementing this Financial Hardship Policy.

Associated Documents/ References

- *Tasmanian Water and Sewerage Industry Customer Service Code*
- TasWater Customer Charter
- TasWater Complaints, Enquiries and Disputes Management Policy

Approved by the Chief Executive Officer on of 2015.

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Chief Executive Officer