
WATER SERVICES FINANCIAL HARDSHIP POLICY

Objective

To provide details of how the Shire of Gnowangerup can assist its Economic Regulation Authority water license customers who cannot pay a rate notice because of financial hardship.

Note: This policy is a requirement of the Shire's water license.

1.0 Purpose

This Financial Hardship Policy outlines how Shire of Gnowangerup (“**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 landowner 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.

2.0 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;
- separation or divorce from a spouse;
- domestic or family violence;
- loss of a spouse or a loved-one;
- physical and mental health problems;
- a chronically ill child;
- budget management difficulties because of low income; or
- other unforeseen factors affecting a customer's capacity to pay, such as reduction in income or an increase in non-discretionary expenditure.

¹ This is because the *Water Services Code of Conduct (Customer Service Standards) 2018* and our water licence only require us to have a hardship policy for any water services we provide to residential customers.

² Clause 22 of the *Water Services Code of Conduct (Customer Service Standards) 2018* defines financial hardship as “being in an ongoing state of financial disadvantage in which the ability of a customer who is a residential customer to meet the basic living needs of the customer or a dependent of the customer would be adversely affected if the customer were to pay an unpaid bill”.

3.0 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.

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.

4.0 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 landowner 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.

5.0 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 and additional fees may apply. 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*.

6.0 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, Centrepay, internet, telephone or post.

Please be advised that Centrepay is only available to customers who receive Centrelink payments. Paying by direct debit or Centrepay may help you manage your bills more easily as your bills will be paid through regular deductions.

For more information on your payment options please contact us.

Concessions and other financial relief assistance: You may be eligible for concession(s) and/or financial relief for your water services portion of your rate notice.

- Concessional rebates may be granted to holders of a:
 - State Seniors Card; or
 - A Commonwealth Seniors Health Card and a State Seniors Card; or
 - A Pensioner Concession Card and a State Seniors Card

- The Hardship Utility Grant Scheme provides financial assistance to Western Australians who are struggling through financial hardship and are unable to pay their utility bills. For eligibility requirements please visit [http://www.concessions.wa.gov.au/Concessions/Pages/HUGS-\(Hardship-Utility-Grant-Scheme\).aspx](http://www.concessions.wa.gov.au/Concessions/Pages/HUGS-(Hardship-Utility-Grant-Scheme).aspx).

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 Yougenup Centre, 47 Yougenup Road, Gnowangerup provides offices for Southern Ag Care Inc. and Centrelink to help with financial counselling.

The Financial Counsellors' Association of WA (FCAWA) can refer you to a financial counsellor in your area. Alternatively you can call the FCAWA's Financial Counselling Helpline. The Helpline provides a free confidential service for all Western Australians with financial problems and queries. The Helpline can be contacted on 1800 007 007. Alternatively you can go to the FCAWA website, www.financialcounsellors.org, and enter your postcode to locate your closest financial counselling service.

The FCAWA's contact details are:

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

7.0 Fees and Charges

We will charge you for the water services we provide to you. A list of our fees and charges may be found in our Annual Budget readily available at the Shire Office, 28 Yougenup Rd, Gnowangerup, WA 6335 or they can be downloaded from our website www.gnowangerup.wa.gov.au.

The Shire of Gnowangerup can also supply a fact sheet to customers on request in person or by mail.

8.0 Complaints Handling

If you have a complaint please contact us first. Our contact details are included in section 10 below.

Our complaints handling process is available at www.gnowangerup.wa.gov.au.

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:	2 nd 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
Website:	www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au
Fax:	(08) 9220 7599
Freefax:	1800 611 279



9.0 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.

10.0 Our Contact Details

You can contact us at:

28 Yougenup Road, Gnowangerup, WA 6335

Phone: 08 9827 1007

Fax: 08 9827 1377

gnpshire@gnowangerup.wa.gov.au

www.gnowangerup.wa.gov.au

TIS – online at <http://www.tisnational.gov.au>

TIS – Phone 131450 Customer Code C958106

TTY/Voice calls – 133 677

Speak and listen - 1300 555 727

SMS relay - 0423 677 767

TTY - online at <http://relayservice.gov.au>

If you are deaf, or have a hearing or speech impairment, find out how to phone us at www.relayservice.gov.au.

COMPLIANCE REQUIREMENTS

Legislation / Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water Services Act 2012 • Water Services Regulations 2012 • Water Services Code of Conduct (Customer Service Standards) 2018
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DOCUMENT CONTROL

FINANCE

Policy Number	4.5
Responsible Officer	Asset & Waste Management Coordinator
Initial Council Adoption	26 February 2014
Review Dates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31 May 2019 • 5 September 2023 (approved by Council 27 September 2023)
Next Review Due	<p>4 September 2028</p> <p>This policy will be reviewed at least every five years or more often where circumstances require.</p>