



Financial Hardship Policy for Water Services

Revised March 2021

ABN: 35 939 977 194

P (08) 9631 1202 E dowshire@dowerin.wa.gov.au
13 Cottrell Street, Dowerin WA 6461

 www.dowerin.wa.gov.au



1 Purpose

This Financial Hardship Policy outlines how Shire of Dowerin (“**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;
- domestic or family violence; and
- other unforeseen factors affecting your capacity to pay, such as a reduction in income or an increase in non-discretionary spending.

3 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 a financial counsellor to contact us on your behalf.

We will assess within five business days whether we consider you to be in financial hardship. If we cannot make our assessment within five 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.

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 19 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 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”.

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 or authorised representative 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 experiencing financial difficulties or are in financial hardship;
- if you are complying with your payment plan or another payment arrangement you have with us; or
- a complaint made to us or the Ombudsman relating to the charge is not resolved.

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, Centrepay, internet, 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.

For more information on your payment options, please contact us.

Concessions and other financial relief or assistance: You may be eligible for a concession for the water services portion of your rate notice. For more information on concessions please refer to your rate notice.

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.

Alternatively, the National Debt Helpline can refer you to a financial counsellor in your area. The contact details for the Helpline are:

Phone: 1800 007 007*

Website: www.ndh.org.au

*Calls made from mobile phones will be charged at the applicable rate

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

We may charge you interest on overdue amounts if not paid by the due date. A Schedule of our Fees and Charges can be found on the Shire’s website (www.dowerin.wa.gov.au) or by contacting the Shire Office.

7 Complaints

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

We will consider your complaint, make appropriate investigations and advise you of any outcomes and discussions to assist you in meeting an agreeable solution.

We may consider the advice of a Financial Counsellor and if deemed appropriate, engage you with a meeting between all parties to arrive with an amicable solution to your situation.

If you are not satisfied with the way we handle your complaint, you may refer your complaint to the Energy & Water Ombudsman WA. The Energy & 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 & Water Ombudsman WA
Postal Address:	PO Box Z5386 St Georges Terrace Perth WA 6831
Freecall:	1800 754 004* *Calls made from mobile phones will be charged at the applicable rate
Phone:	08 9220 7588
Fax:	08 9220 7599
Freefax:	1800 611 279
TIS:	Translating and Interpreting Service Ph: 131 450
TTY:	National Relay Service Ph: 133 677
Email:	energyandwater@ombudsman.wa.gov.au
Website:	www.energyandwater.ombudsman.wa.gov.au
Opening Hours:	8.30am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday

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:

Company Name	Shire of Dowerin
Street Address:	13 Cottrell Street Dowerin WA 6461
Postal Address:	PO Box 111 Dowerin WA 6461
Phone:	08 9631 1202
Email:	dowshire@dowerin.wa.gov.au
Website:	www.dowerin.wa.gov.au
Opening Hours:	8.30am to 4.00pm Monday to Friday

The Shire of Dowerin welcomes calls through the National Relay Service; if you are deaf, have a hearing and/or speech impairment. Choose your access option [click here](#) and provide our phone number 08 9631 1202 when asked by the relay officer.

National Relay Service – Select your preferred [access option](#) and ask for 08 9631 1202

Help for people with hearing or speech difficulties. Contact the Shire of Dowerin through the National Relay Service (NRS). For more information, visit the NRS website (communications.gov.au/accesshub/nrs) to choose your preferred access point or call the NRS Helpdesk on 1800 555 660 for guidance.