



Hardship Program - Victoria

31 July 2023

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Introduction

This policy is for all residential customers of Energy Locals in Victoria.

The Energy Retail Code sets out our obligations and minimum customer entitlements. Where there's an inconsistency between the Energy Retail Code and this policy, the Code takes precedent.

The Energy Locals Hardship Policy guides us in identifying and assisting customers who may be experiencing payment difficulties due to hardship.

We developed this policy and subsequent procedures to ensure that our customers, if experiencing hardship, continue to have access to this essential service. We understand that Energy is a necessity, and we promise to work with our customers to allow them access to it and to ensure that disconnection of this service is at a last resort.

What is a hardship situation?

Everyone hits a rough patch from time to time. Hardship is defined as being a situation where one of our customers is willing to pay their energy bills but is unable to do so. This can happen for a number of reasons, such as health issues or loss of income.

Applying for hardship assistance

If you think you are in, or may be about to enter, a hardship situation, we ask that you please contact us as soon as possible so that we can provide you with the assistance that you are entitled to.

Identifying and responding early to Hardship

We ask that our customers tell us as soon as possible if they are struggling to pay a bill.

We know that not every customer will be willing or able to do that, so we will also look for customers who may have:

- repeated late payments, part-payments or non-payments;

- an unexpected change to usual payment patterns;
- repeated transactions declined by their bank;
- a person working on their behalf (e.g., a financial counsellor or welfare agency)
- contact us about their financial difficulties.

If we see one or more of the above events happening or if you've not paid your bill by the due date and have arrears of more than \$55 (inclusive of GST), we may contact you via telephone or written correspondence to inform you of this Policy and to provide assistance.

How the Hardship Policy works

Our Hardship Policy aims to assist customers in a number of ways. As part of the new Payment Difficulty Framework implemented for Victorian residential customers in January 2019 the following help is available:

General help

This is available to all residential customers and the aim is to help avoid building up arrears. Help includes being able to:

- Set up regular payments on a payment plan for up to two years;
- Make regular payments of an equal amount on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis;
- Extend the due date for one of your bills at least once a year;
- Pay a bill in advance

Tailored help

If you're a residential customer and your account is in arrears, you're entitled to a higher level of assistance.

If you've missed your bill's due date and need some extra help, you can contact us via our website, email us at hardship@energylocals.com.au or call us on 1300 693 637.

We can provide you with help and advice that includes:

- Being able to set up a payment plan for up to two years, which covers both your current balance and your ongoing usage.
- An estimate of the future cost of your usage and advice on how to reduce it.

- Other assistance that's available through the government that can help you meet your energy costs (e.g., Utility Relief Grants and concession rebates)
- Other assistance that may help you lower your bills, including checking you're on the best tariff for your usage pattern.

Within 21 business days of your bill's due date, we'll send you information about the assistance options you're entitled to and how to access them. You'll have 6 business days to consider this information and let us know whether you'd like to choose one of them.

More help

If you're not able to pay for all of your ongoing energy charges, we can put a hold on the payment of your debt for six months, during which time you can pay less than your ongoing usage cost while you work towards lowering your energy usage. At the end of this six-month period, you are entitled to a payment plan of up to two years to repay your arrears and ongoing usage. We will also see how you're doing and work with you to pay your ongoing bills and reduce your costs.

Payment plans

How these work

We can help you by offering a payment arrangement. This works as follows:

- We agree equal amounts that will be paid weekly, fortnightly, or monthly
- The payments will incorporate the debt on your account so that it's completely cleared within two years of the first payment
- The payments will include the cost of your ongoing usage too, based on a forecast of your usage over the next year
- Once the payment arrangement is set up, we'll send you a confirmation that tells you:
 - The total number of payments that you'll need to make to finish paying off the arrears
 - How long the payments will last
 - The amount and date that each payment is due

If you don't make a payment towards the cost of your ongoing usage by the due date, we will contact you to discuss varying the amount or frequency of these payments, to give you time to lower your energy costs.

It's your responsibility to work with us to implement the practical assistance that we will help with. If you don't do this, we will contact you to agree a timeframe for that assistance to be implemented.

Payments towards ongoing usage

If we've placed your debt on hold and you don't stick to your agreed payment plan, we'll contact you to talk about things that may help including adjusting the payment amount and/or the frequency of the payments. We'll also add any unpaid amount to the arrears that are owed.

When assistance ends

Assistance under this policy may end if:

- You're unwilling to take reasonable steps towards paying for your ongoing energy usage or repaying the outstanding debt
- You're no longer facing payment difficulties

Other help

Government concessions

You might be able to benefit from assistance via government concessions. The full details are listed on the Department of Health and Human Services website www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/financial-support/concessions/energy or by calling them on 1800 658 521.

If you think you may be entitled to a concession, please contact us so we can help.

Home energy advice

You may be entitled to a home energy consultation via phone or in person. This can help identify ways in which your usage could be reduced.

Flexible payment options

We or one of our partners may be able to help you with flexible payment options for the replacement of an existing appliance, such as a heating or cooling system.

Financial counselling

In some circumstances we may suggest a referral to a free accredited financial counsellor who's local to you. You don't have to see the financial counsellor in order to receive assistance under this Policy.

Methods of payment

Customers can pay us by Credit or Debit Card, Direct Debit or BPay.

Hardship Customers that receive a Centrelink payment can also make payments via Centrepay. Centrepay deducts payments of \$10 or more from your Centrelink payments to help pay your energy bill.

Training our staff

Energy Locals staff are well trained in a variety of ways to help customers, including those in Hardship. Our training includes skills on how to:

- Identify potential Hardship situations
- Best assist customers on the Hardship Policy
- Communicate with understanding and empathy

This policy

This policy comes into effect as soon as practicable, and no later than seven days, after approval by the Essential Services Commission. The policy was formally approved by the Essential Services Commission on 6 February 2019.

Our Hardship Policy will always be available on our website. To ensure we best help our customers, and to maintain compliance with any changes to legislation, we will review and update the Policy from time to time. If a customer is on the Hardship Policy and we make a change that affects them, we will tell them about it.

This policy will also be distributed too relevant third parties, including financial counsellors and welfare agencies.

Energy Locals will also provide our customers with a copy of the Hardship Policy at no cost upon request.

Privacy

To assist on the Hardship Policy, we will need to ask you some questions about your circumstances. You do not need to provide us with specific information to be entitled to assistance under this Policy. The information you give us will be handled in accordance with our published Privacy Policy.

Complaints

If you believe we have not acted in line with this policy, or if you have a complaint or feedback about our service, you can raise a complaint by contacting us by one of the following:

- email us at hello@energylocals.com.au
- Write to us at Energy Locals, Tenancy 2, 11 Newton St, Cremorne, Victoria 3121.
- Call us on 1300 693 637

Our aim is to resolve all complaints quickly, with empathy and to everyone's satisfaction. Further detail on our approach is outlined in our Complaints Handling Procedure, located on our website at energylocals.com.au/complaints. You can also request it by calling us on the number above.

If you're not satisfied with the way we handle your complaint you can also contact the relevant ombudsman:

NSW: Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW

<https://www.ewon.com.au>

1800 246545

SA: Energy & Water Ombudsman SA

<https://ewosa.com.au>

1800 665 565

QLD: Energy & Water Ombudsman QLD

<https://www.ewoq.com.au>

1800 662 837

TAS: Energy Ombudsman Tasmania
<https://www.energyombudsman.tas.gov.au>
1800 001 170

ACT: ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal
<https://www.acat.act.gov.au>
(02) 6207 1740



Contact

If you'd like to discuss our Hardship Policy, please contact Energy Locals.

Phone: 1300 693 637. Tell us you'd like to talk about hardship and someone who is specially trained will assist you.

Email:
hardship@energylocals.com.au

Online chat: Go to energylocals.com.au and click the chat icon at the bottom right. Tell us you'd like to talk about hardship.

Mail: Energy Locals
Tenancy 2,
11 Newton St,
Cremorne VIC 3121

Interpreter Services:
(TIS) 131 450

Hearing difficulty service:
(NRS) 133 677