



FINANCIAL HARDSHIP POLICY

Our Neighbourhood Energy
(trading as Neighbourhood Energy)

Version 14

Neighbourhood Energy's Financial Hardship Policy

Background

Neighbourhood Energy is a community oriented business.

We understand that there can be times when our domestic customers, through no fault of their own, may be struggling to pay their electricity bills.

This Financial Hardship Policy outlines the minimum standards we will adopt in dealing with domestic customers who are experiencing hardship.

The policy is freely available by contacting us directly by phone or mail, or on our web site.

If you are in a situation of genuine financial hardship and cannot pay your electricity bill please contact us urgently on [1300 764 860](tel:1300764860) so that we can do our best to help you.

Definition

We define financial hardship as:□

- where you tell us you are experiencing difficulty paying your bill, or
- where your payment history suggests difficulties with payments, or
- where your independent accredited financial counsellor tells us that you are having problems paying your electricity bill due to financial hardship.

Our customer values

We recognise that for a whole variety of reasons you might find yourself in times of genuine financial hardship and unable to pay your electricity bills. Our hardship policy is in place to help and support you. We will try and find workable solutions to help you that are fair, equitable, effective and lasting for both you and us.

Our customer charter

Neighbourhood Energy's Customer Charter setting out our values has been provided to you as part of contracting with us for the supply of electricity. It is also available on our website at www.neighbourhood.com.au .

Our Customer Charter makes direct reference to our Hardship Policy. It also summarises assistance available to you on such matters as payment plans, financial counsellors, guidance, and Government assistance.

Our clear message to you is this:□

If you find yourself in financial difficulty and you cannot pay your electricity bill, please contact us for assistance as soon as you can and before the bill is due for payment. Our number is [1300 764 860](tel:1300764860) .

Our approach

Our approach is to treat you with courtesy and respect. We understand that if you are faced with financial stress things need to be managed both with timeliness (to prevent further escalation of the situation) and with the utmost sensitivity.

We will ensure that you are fully informed of your rights and obligations under the terms of your contract, including your rights and obligations under this hardship policy, in relation to:□

- additional time to pay;
- instalment plans;
- Government programs if applicable; and
- payment options such as direct debit.

These are described in more detail below.

Our processes are managed by members of our senior management team who will be in direct communication with you to ensure utmost confidence in our approach.

In recognition of the importance we place on our Financial Hardship Policy, all our staff members and external service providers have been made aware of the rights and obligations which are set out in the policy, both for the company and our customers. Under our policy, members of our senior management team have direct responsibilities and accountabilities in the management of financial hardship cases.

Availability

Our Financial Hardship Policy is available to you at any time that you are experiencing temporary or more permanent financial hardship, resulting in non-payment of your electricity bills. We will make every effort to assist you in such circumstances. Please call us on [1300 764 860](tel:1300764860) for assistance.

Our process

We have an even-handed equitable approach to assisting you if you experience financial hardship. We also recognise that your situation may well be different to others we have experienced.

Some situations are short-term, and others longer-term.

With the shorter-term situation we may be able to help you with a payment plan.

With the longer-term situation we will work with you to provide a range of options that will provide a more sustainable approach.

In all cases, communication between us is critical. If you are suffering financial hardship which is affecting your ability to pay your electricity bills it is very important to tell us as soon as possible. We can address it with you in a way best suited to your circumstances.

Some indicators of financial hardship

- You are not paying all or part of your electricity bill on an ongoing basis;
- You have broken an agreed instalment plan;
- Your independent financial counsellor contacts us, with your authority, and tells us that you are experiencing financial hardship and unable to pay your electricity bill;
- We are advised that you have applied for a Utilities Relief Grant;
- You advise us that you have problems paying your electricity bill.

Application of our financial hardship policy

We will ask you to demonstrate a willingness to participate with us in managing your electricity-related debt.

You will be asked to agree to a payment plan that offers temporary or ongoing relief, without allowing the accumulation of increasing debt.

All our discussions will be in the strictest confidence.

Contact us early

Please contact us on [1300 764 860](tel:1300764860) before the next payment date if you cannot make the next electricity bill payment.

Early alert to your potential hardship issues

We issue bills monthly, which alerts us early to potential problems when you do not make your electricity bill payment. We welcome early approaches by customers experiencing financial hardship so that this policy can be implemented.

There are several actions which can be taken to alleviate financial burdens arising from your use of electricity.

Additional time to pay

An extension of time to pay your bill may be arranged, at our discretion, for some or all the amount owed. Our senior management representative who is responsible for your case is authorised to make this decision. All discussions with you will be confidential.

Instalment plans

If you would like to make payments in advance of your next bill we can easily arrange this for you.

We can also provide you with the facility to pay amounts in arrears on an agreed instalment plan.

In agreeing an instalment plan with you, we will agree the period of the plan, the amount of the instalments (reflecting your consumption needs and your capacity to pay), the number of instalments, and details of the method of instalment calculation.

We will review progress on your plan for such situations as when supply trends are different to previously estimated, and agree with you any plan changes to adjust for this.

Government programs

If you meet certain criteria you may be eligible for government programs which provide financial assistance to people having difficulty paying their electricity accounts.

In Victoria, a range of assistance is available. Full details may be accessed on the Department of Human Services (DHS) web site at www.dhs.vic.gov.au/concessions/guide/g_energy.htm .

Some of the programs currently available are:□

- the Utility Relief Grant Scheme for customers experiencing severe “one off” financial difficulty; and
- the Capital Grant Program to Victorian home owners holding a current concession card.

We can help you gain access to all government concessions to which you are entitled.

Payment options

We recommend the use of electronic payment options to maximise your savings. Our bills set out the electronic payment options available to you, including BPAY, internet, telephone, direct debit and POSTbillpay. If you want

to pay in person, payments can be made at any branch of Australia Post or by mail.

Disconnection an absolutely last resort

We will attempt to make both written and verbal contact with you on at least three occasions if you do not pay our bill.

We will genuinely encourage you, if you break a payment plan, to discuss another plan or utilise other resources to help you.

If we contact you at what would normally be the disconnection of supply stage, we will make it clear to you that we will not disconnect your supply earlier than 7 business days after receipt of the disconnection notice.

If you absolutely refuse to provide reasonable assurance of payment, or if you do so and then fail to follow another payment plan, we do have the ultimate legal right to disconnect your electricity supply. We do not wish to do this. We will always seek to negotiate an outcome with you rather than leave you without electricity. Disconnection is our absolutely last resort, and we would consider it only after we have exhausted all other reasonable avenues.

At all stages we will use our best endeavours to contact you to establish if your failure to pay our bill is due to genuine financial hardship.

Continuation of your electricity supply

Whilst you are participating as agreed in the payment plan your power supply will not be disconnected and no debt collection action will be commenced on your electricity account with us.

Our senior management will help you with your hardship issues

We recognise that when you contact us about a financial hardship issue you will want personal and well informed assistance.

When you call our Customer Service Centre and indicate you cannot pay your electricity bill due to financial hardship, they will connect you with a senior member of our management team.

Our approach is to manage such very personal issues using our senior management.

Our senior management have a mature approach, are well informed and empowered to provide you with real and meaningful advice and assistance.

If you like you can simply leave your phone number with our Contact Centre and a member of our senior management will contact you at a mutually convenient time.

Energy efficiency advice

In recognition of the importance of energy conservation, we have instituted a field audit service for our customers. This program aims to achieve significant cost savings by reducing electricity consumption.

The service can identify reasons for the level of electricity consumption and suggest changes to reduce the cost to you. It is managed by our senior management representative responsible for your contract.

We can arrange a visit to site by an experienced and qualified person, who will provide you with a report on changes which you can make to your electricity usage.

If you are in financial hardship we can arrange to waive the normal contribution for personalised energy efficiency advice.

Advising you of other support services

We can provide you with information on support services that may be able to assist you overcoming financial hardship issues eg (Centrelink, Department of Veterans Affairs, free independent financial counselling advisory services, and relevant community based groups).

We will work in partnership with such bodies and will take into consideration their advice concerning your bill.

Electrical equipment replacement

If you are experiencing financial hardship we can provide sound and independent advice on the purchase or supply of replacement electricity equipment.

Where a field audit recommends replacement of an appliance to reduce electricity consumption, we can refer eligible customers suffering financial hardship to a panel of reputable electricity appliance retailers who are able to advise you on suitable alternative appliances.

Where it can be demonstrated that a replacement appliance will enable an eligible customer experiencing financial hardship to reduce electricity consumption, and hence alleviate the financial burden being experienced, we will contribute a proportion of the projected savings towards the upfront purchase price of the appliance. We will source the appliance on behalf of the customer so that the energy audit recommendations are implemented.

A formula has been developed to calculate the amount of this contribution.

This formula takes into account:

- the current average bill;
- the estimated bill after replacement of the appliance;
- the cost of the energy audit;
- the cost of the appliance;
- the length of time over which repayments are to be made; and
- any contributions made from other sources, such as the Energy Grant Scheme.

The contribution will be approved by the senior manager responsible for your case.

Your privacy is protected

We will protect your privacy at all times in accordance with the Privacy Act 1988.

Review

This policy is reviewed annually.