

Hardship Program

Updated: 19 September 2018

Purpose

The Energy Locals Hardship Program 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 hardship?

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 our customers think they are in, or may be about to enter, a hardship situation, we ask that they please contact us as soon as possible. Customers may be eligible for assistance if they can answer 'yes' to these 3 questions:

- Is our customer willing but genuinely unable to pay their bills?
- Is our customer willing to work with us on a way to keep their bills paid and their power connected?
- If our customer has previously been on our Hardship Program, have they adhered to the terms of it (unless their circumstances have significantly changed)?

If they can answer 'yes' to the above 3 questions, our customer is to email us at: billing@energytrade.com.au with details of their circumstances. We'll review the information and aim to get back to them within 2 working days. Alternatively, they can call us on 1300 001 256.

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, we may contact our customers via telephone or written correspondence to inform them of this Program, check if it could be helpful to them and to assess their eligibility.

A telephone call will be made to our customers if their energy account remains unpaid after the reminder due date. Once contact is made our Credit and Collections staff member will assess the customer for capacity to pay and potential hardship.

Entry into the Hardship Program

Initially we will accept customer cases on face value while we assess their eligibility for the program. During this time the customer's energy account will be placed on a temporarily hold status to stop any collection notices or disconnection of services. Our customer may still be required to make payment towards their energy account during this time.

Customers can be identified either by self-assessment, an Energy Locals staff member or via contact by an accredited financial counsellor.

How the Hardship Program works

Our Hardship Program aims to assist customers in a number of ways. Some of these are listed here:

- We'll agree with them the type of assistance and payment arrangement that's most suited to their circumstances. It's important that our customers adhere to the payment arrangement agreed to.
- We'll ensure that while they are adhering to the payment arrangement, we won't hassle them with reminders of overdue debt and disconnection notices.
- We won't disconnect our customers supply while they're adhering to the arrangement.
- We won't apply late payment fees to their debt and we won't ask for a security deposit.
- We'll check that they're on the best tariff for their usage.
- We'll provide our customers with tips on how to reduce their usage and perform a telephone energy audit, if they need it. Customers who can and do reduce energy usage can exit hardship situations faster.
- We'll check if they're eligible for any government concessions and rebates.
- We will assist in providing them with additional information on other services that may help in their situation, such as NILS and Community Schemes.
- If our customers are under severe hardship, then we strongly suggest that they seek specific advice from a financial counsellor. If they've been unable to do that, we will try to identify one in their local area for them.

Flexible payment options

Our Hardship Program contains a number of flexible payment options to help our customers to pay their energy bill. We'll discuss these options and agree which works best for them. The approach is detailed below:

Payment options

Flexible payment options include:

- Bill smoothing is offered to all of our customers, regular payments before the customer uses energy, will help prevent debt increasing.
- Paying the existing energy bill (s) in instalments.
- Additional extensions to the payment plan due dates, as we understand things can come up from time to time.

Customers' capacity to pay

To make sure we put our customers on the right payment plan, we need to assess their capacity to pay. To do this we need to balance the maintenance of a minimum living standard with the need to pay for energy they've used and will continue to use.

To do this, we'll ask our customers some questions so we can work out a payment arrangement that they can afford. To make sure their debt doesn't creep up again, we'll also estimate their electricity usage over the following 12 months. If we can, we'll reduce future bills by recommending some energy efficiency tips. This doesn't mean that the payment plan can only go for a 12-month period: we will review the plan every 3 months to ensure it is still meeting the customer's requirements, and amending the plan as required.

Any amendments to the original payment plan will always be agreed with the customer and then placed in writing to confirm.

If we receive information from a financial counsellor on behalf of our customer, we'll also take this into account.

Payment plan

Next we'll agree a payment plan that helps our customers stay connected while also reducing their debt and paying for ongoing consumption. We'll confirm all this in writing, including:

- How long the plan will last for.
- How often the instalments will be due.
- The amount and date each instalment is due.
- The number of instalments needed to pay off their debt (if applicable).
- The expected date the "current" debt amount will be paid off and when paying for their consumption with no debt will occur (this is subject to estimated usage so this date may vary).
- Their rights and obligations.
- How the instalments for ongoing consumption were calculated (if applicable).

Energy Locals wants to work collaboratively with our customers to decide on a payment plan that will suit them best. We will do our best to work with our customers to achieve the outcome of reducing debt on their account and ensuring that future energy consumed is also paid on time.

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.

Revising a payment plan

During a customer's payment plan, we'll check how it's working for them. We may find that it's necessary to review the plan to ensure it's appropriate for their usage and circumstances. The plan will be reviewed on a quarterly basis and if we feel any amendments need to be made, Energy Locals will contact them to discuss the new plan.

Energy Locals acknowledges that extensions on the agreed payment plan due dates can be helpful for a customer experiencing additional short-term payment difficulties; but this will add to the stress of customers experiencing more chronic payment difficulties and hardship. We acknowledge that circumstances can change, therefore reviewing payment plans along the way is an important step within the program.

It's important to understand that we may cancel the plan if it's not working. This could be due to customers paying too little or too much and not engaging with us or if customers continue to miss the agreed payments without advising us.

Engagement is important, and we encourage customers to always contact us if their circumstances change. If a plan is cancelled the customer will also be informed by written correspondence either via email or via post.

Concessions and rebates

Customers may be eligible for assistance via one of the government concession schemes. As they know their circumstances best, and may already have relationships with some of the government departments that govern these schemes, we recommend checking the details relevant to your state:

- **New South Wales:** www.resourcesandenergy.nsw.gov.au
- **Victoria:** www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/financial-support/concessions/energy or call 1800 658 521.
- **South Australia:** www.sa.gov.au/topics/care-and-support/financial-support/concessions or call 1800 307 758.
- **Queensland:** www.communities.qld.gov.au or call 13 74 68.
- **ACT:** www.assistance.act.gov.au/utilities
- **Tasmania:** www.concessions.tas.gov.au

If we identify a customer as being in Hardship, we'll try to help by telling them about the schemes that they may be eligible for. This is not limited to concessions and rebates, there are other services that can help our customers who are in hardship, such as the NILS scheme and Community Buying Schemes. We can also help them with the information that they may need to apply for assistance under one of these programs.

Financial counsellors

If a customer is already working with a financial counsellor or begins speaking with one while on the Hardship Program, they can give the counsellor authority to speak with us on their behalf.

Energy Locals can assist customers by pointing them in the right direction and providing contact information for free financial counselling services in their local area.

Checking they're on the best tariff

As part of our Hardship Program, we will check that our customers' current tariff is the most appropriate for their circumstances when taking into account their usage level, the time of day and days of the week when they consume the most energy and so on. If we believe that they can save money by changing onto a different tariff, we will ask for their approval to make that change. There will be no cost or penalty from that change.

Reducing consumption

There are a number of ways in which customers can reduce their consumption, and in turn their bill. Once we understand more about their appliances and energy usage we can identify actions that may help, so as part of the Hardship Program we may ask questions about how our customers use power and offer to conduct a telephone energy audit.

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 Program.
- Communicate with understanding and empathy.

This policy

Our Hardship Program 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 Program from time to time. If a customer is on the Hardship Program and we make a change that affects them, we will tell them about it.

This policy will also be distributed to 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.

Rights and obligations

Remaining on the Hardship Program

The Hardship Program can only be successful if we all adhere to our obligations. We won't put our customers on a payment or instalment plan without talking with them, and we need our customers to commit to the ongoing payments as per the written confirmation we'll send them.

If our customers' circumstances change or they feel they cannot make a particular payment, they should let us know so we can talk about whether a change is needed to the arrangement.

Leaving the Hardship Program

We want to help all our customers 'graduate' from the Hardship Program. Once both our customers and we are confident that they can meet their normal payment obligations, we'll transfer them from the Hardship Program to our normal billing cycle.

It's important to note that customers may also leave or be removed from the Hardship Program if they:

- Decide they no longer wish to be part of the Program and want to return to a normal billing and collection process
- Show that they're not willing to engage with us to make the Program successful, such as avoiding contact with Energy Locals, not willing to discuss ways to reduce energy usage or not working collaboratively to regain a good financial position with their energy account
- Fail to meet the payment plan or instalment plan we agree as part of the Program and without contacting Energy Locals. If contact is made then Energy Locals will assess the situation and see if further assistance can be provided, such as allowing a payment to be missed, accepting a partial payment, reducing payment amounts or extending time to pay.
- Transfer to another energy retailer

If customers leave and then decide they want to re-enter the Program, we will reassess their circumstances and eligibility.

Complaints

If our customers have feedback on our Hardship Program or feel we have not met its objectives, we ask they email us at billing@energytrade.com.au so that we can investigate or call our Customer Service team on 1300 001 256

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. If we're unable to resolve a complaint to the customer's satisfaction, we will provide the details for the relevant Energy & Water Ombudsman for further assistance.

Language Interpreting Service and National Relay Service

If our customers experience difficulty in understanding the English Language or have hearing difficulties, Energy Locals will provide them with access to a language interpreting service (TIS) or the national relay service (NRS), at no cost.

Privacy

To assist on the Hardship Program, we will need to ask our customers some questions about their circumstances. The information they give us will be handled in accordance with our Privacy Policy.