

## Residential Hardship

PCS-003  
Revision 03

### 1 Background

The Corporation is required to manage customer debt to meet social obligations while also maintaining commercial focus. In September 2003 the Victorian Water Industry Association released the Industry Guide on Residential Hardship Policy as a means of providing Corporations with guidance towards the best practice. In addition, from July 2005, water businesses must abide by the Essential Services Commission Customer Service Code which specifies standards and conditions of service and supply that water businesses must comply with in providing regulated services to customers.

### 2 Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to outline SGW's standard of service when dealing with customers experiencing financial hardship.

### 3 Definitions

For the purposes of this policy only, the following shall mean:

**Customer experiencing financial hardship:** A customer experiencing financial hardship is someone who is identified either by themselves, the water business, or an independent accredited financial counsellor as having the intention to pay, but who does not have the financial capacity to make the required payments within the timeframe set out in the Corporation's payment terms.

**SGW:** South Gippsland Water

### 4 Policy

South Gippsland Water is aware that there are complex socio-economic factors in the communities that they serve, and acknowledges that some customers will experience some form of financial hardship from time to time.

Where customers are experiencing financial hardship SGW will:

- Engage in discussions with customers to determine eligibility using objective criteria as indicators of hardship. Criteria may include:
  - A customer's eligibility for concessions;
  - A customer's status as a tenant;
  - Previous customer applications for the Utility Relief Grant Scheme;
  - A customer's previous payment history; and
  - Appropriate self-assessment by the customer.

- Ensure internal assessment processes are designed to make an early identification of a customer's hardship. This will include Customer Service Staff referring customers to the Office Manager when Instalment Plans cannot be agreed upon;
- State any circumstances in which the Corporation will waive or suspend interest payments on outstanding amounts;
- Exempt customers in hardship from supply restriction, legal action, and additional debt recovery costs while payments are made to the Corporation;
- Provide complete or partial debt waiver if customer meets required criteria, as set by The SGW Customer Service Manual, Section 8. (Tariff Assistance and Hardship Relief Schemes);
- Offer a range of payment options in accordance with the customers capacity to pay;
- Provide for written confirmation of any alternative payment method to be sent to customers within 10 business days of an agreement being reached
- Offer information and referral to government assistance programs and no-cost independent financial counsellors;
- Provide information about the Corporation's dispute resolution policy and the customers right to lodge a complaint with external dispute resolution forums;
- Detail the circumstances in which this policy will cease to apply to customers;
- The Office Manager will be trained in all hardship practices and procedures and will have access to, and be familiar with, all reference materials as listed below;
- Customer Service staff will be trained in identifying possible hardship cases ensuring customers in hardship are treated with sensitivity and without making value judgments; and
- The Office Manager will be responsible for communicating with customers in hardship, ensuring all relevant procedures are followed.

## 5 Responsibilities

**Office Manager** is responsible for:

- Ensuring that Customer Service Staff are appropriately trained in dealing with customers experiencing financial hardship;
- Ensuring that this policy is followed by Customer Service staff at times when dealing with customers experiencing financial hardship; and
- Communicating with the customer once financial hardship has been identified.

**Customer Service Staff** are responsible for:

- Abiding by this policy and *SCS-003 Residential Hardship Procedure* when dealing with customers experiencing financial hardship; and
- Treating customers suffering financial hardship with sensitivity without making value judgments.

## 6 References

Victorian Water Industry Association Industry Guide on Residential Hardship

ESC Customer Service Code – Metropolitan and Regional Water Businesses

Information Privacy Act 2000

South Gippsland Water Customer Service Manual – Section 8 – Tariff Assistance and Hardship Relief Schemes

South Gippsland Water Customer Charter – Section 5 – Payments

PCS-004 Customer Debt Recovery Policy

SCS-003 Residential Hardship Procedure

This document is to be reviewed in April 2012 or earlier as required.

*This document must not be released to external parties without approval by the Managing Director.*

DOCUMENT APPROVAL		
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