

SUPPORT FOR HOUSEHOLDS AND SMALL BUSINESSES FACING HARDSHIP IN PAYING FOR ESSENTIAL SERVICES

To protect both residential and small businesses experiencing financial stress, hardship support by essential service providers (energy, water and telecommunications providers, and local governments) should:

- Adhere to the following nationally consistent principles, which builds on actions required or sought for residential and small business customers in the energy and telecommunications sectors;
- Align with nationally consistent approaches to identifying those in financial stress. For example, businesses that qualify for the JobKeeper Payment are defined as being under financial stress under this arrangement; and
- Focus on keeping those facing hardship connected and working to find a mutually sustainable solution to enable households and businesses to rebuild on the other side.

Customers who can pay their bills should continue to do so, to help ensure the continued financial viability of essential service providers.

These principles aim to promote consistency across sectors and jurisdictions, including for eligibility to hardship programs, and ensure an appropriate safety net is in place for vulnerable families and businesses during the economic shock caused by COVID-19. These principles are in addition to existing policies and requirements, which may apply to these sectors.

Support Principles

1. Encourage customers to contact their service providers at the earliest opportunity to discuss their situation.
2. Establish clear processes to identify, and to promptly and appropriately manage, households and small businesses experiencing financial stress, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper Payment, such as customers who:
 - a. Repeatedly fail to pay bills on time
 - b. Submit questions or issues to customer service centres.
3. Offer households and small businesses that indicate they may be in financial stress, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper Payment, the option of going on a payment plan and/or other flexible options including bill smoothing, flexible repayment options, payment deferrals, extensions and access to Centrepay or other payment services.
4. Be prepared to modify existing payment plans if a customer's changed circumstances make this necessary.
5. Do not disconnect or restrict supply to households or small businesses in financial stress, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper Payment.

6. Defer referrals of households and small businesses in financial stress, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper Payment, for debt recovery/collection proceedings and credit default listings.
7. Suspend sale of debt while there is an arrangement in place with a customer under a hardship policy.
8. Waive late fees, interest charges and charges for collection of overdue amounts for households and small businesses in financial stress, including small businesses eligible for the JobKeeper Payment.
9. Provide clear, up-to-date and readily available information about arrangements available to those in financial stress via multiple physical and digital communication channels.
10. Provide advice to households and small business customers about appropriate government concession programs and financial counselling services, and strategies to reduce their bills, and/or consumption of the service, in order to reduce future payment difficulties.
11. Minimise the frequency and duration of planned outages for critical works, and provide as much notice as possible to assist households and businesses during any outage.

Compliance and Delivery

These support measures should be provided through appropriate existing support and delivery mechanisms, including local governments, service providers and industry associations. This includes:

- Local Government NSW
- Local Government Association of South Australia
- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Local Government Association of Tasmania
- Local Government Association of the Northern Territory
- Local Government Association of Queensland
- The Western Australian Local Government Association.