

Attachment

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES

The table below provides a summary of examples that may assist businesses in developing or enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of their hardship programs. For each of the questions raised by the Commission, the table identifies the businesses undertaking the practice and describes the practice in focus.

Q1

How does the business' policies, practices and procedures ensure that appropriate levels of customer service—in terms of the nature of the service interaction, and quality and timeliness of information offered—are provided to customers in hardship?

AGL provides training that explains both the AGL approach to hardship and the regulatory responsibilities we must comply with in respect to vulnerable customers. Staff are provided with specific hardship training by Kildonan Uniting Care which covers a range of topics aimed at providing staff working directly with vulnerable customers the necessary tools, insights and greater levels of

understanding, to position them to treat customers respectfully and steer them to personnel within AGL who are best placed to assist them.

South East Water has partnered with Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service to provide assistance to customers experiencing extreme financial difficulties; these services are fully funded by South East Water. This approach recognises the value of expert assistance when dealing with the complex social and economic problems of those customers experiencing hardship. The partnership also provides South East Water employees with training, policy change information and general guidance about financial hardship.

Q2

How does the business ensure that hardship customers are appropriately identified?

Simply Energy actively review customer debt levels to proactively identify those customers who may be in hardship but who may not yet have sought assistance. Simply Energy has found that this is helping customers because they are provided with assistance before too much debt is built up, and ensures that customers who may be embarrassed about their financial circumstances and thus reluctant to make contact, are identified early.

Western Water, Yarra Valley Water and AGL have initiated a study facilitated by Kildonan Uniting Care that allows for the mutual referral of customers identified as being in hardship to a peer's hardship program. The program is designed to minimise barriers to assistance for hardship customers.

Q3

How does the business ensure that it is complying with the Commission's Codes and guidelines in relation to the provision of information to customers in hardship?

Coliban Water invites staff from the Department of Human Services to provide training sessions for Customer Service and Revenue staff so they can fully understand the Utility Relief Grant and the other government grants and schemes available to customers.

Origin Energy has a dedicated hardship team that has well documented systems and procedures in support of their hardship charter. Monitoring of performance against the charter is supported by monitoring activities, including quality checks against hardship accounts, regular performance reviews and weekly team meetings, and proactive monitoring of telephone calls received from customers.

Q4

How does the business ensure that payment terms under customer payment plans are set in line with customer capacity to pay (as required by the Commission's codes and guidelines)?

Origin Energy takes a customer's word for what they can afford to pay, and does not seek to delve further into the customer's financial circumstances to determine "actual" or "genuine" hardship. We see capacity to pay as what the customer advises they can afford.

Yarra Valley Water cites flexibility as a key factor in agreeing on payment arrangements with customers. If a Yarra Valley Water customer is unable to pay their agreed payment arrangement for a particular reason the customer is encouraged to contact the business to discuss the matter and amend payment terms as required.

Q5

How does the business ensure that customers are notified of any pending disconnection (energy) and restriction (water), in a non-threatening way?

City West Water does not make use of restrictions on domestic customers. If restrictions were necessary they cannot be made without two face-to-face visits with the customer and Managing Director approval.

Gippsland Water employs a series of steps prior to initiating a restriction of water supply. In addition to reminder and warning notices sent as a result of customer non-payment, Gippsland Water attempts to contact customers via phone calls and if this fails, a visit to the customers property, prior to restricting water supply. This approach is consistent with the hardship related GSL implemented by a number of water businesses in 2010. The GSL seeks to maximise opportunities for customers experiencing financial difficulty to discuss with their business the range of assistance available to them.