

Council Policy – Financial Hardship COVID-19

Responsible Directorate	Corporate Services
Responsible Business Unit/s	Finance
Responsible Officer	Manager Finance and Administration
Affected Business Unit/s	Finance

Objective

The objective of this policy is to:

- give effect to the Shire of Ashburton's (the Shire) commitment to support the whole community, to meet the unprecedented challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, recognising these challenges will result in financial hardship for our ratepayers.
- ensure we offer fair, equitable, consistent, and dignified support to ratepayers suffering hardship during the pandemic, while treating all members of the community with respect and understanding at this difficult time.

Scope

This policy applies to:

- outstanding rates and service charges as at the date of adoption of this policy, and
- rates and service charges levied during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a reasonable community expectation, as the Shire deals with the effects of the pandemic that those with the capacity to pay rates will continue to do so.

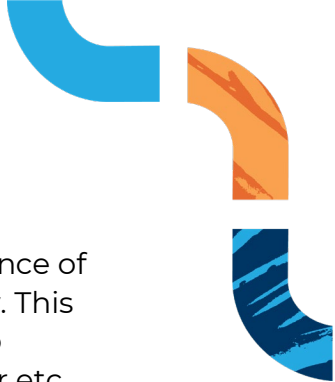
For this reason, this policy is not intended to provide rate relief to ratepayers who are not able to evidence financial hardship and the statutory provisions of the *Local Government Act 1995* (the Act) and *Local Government (Financial Management) Regulations 1996* will apply.

Policy Statement

Payment difficulties, hardship and vulnerability

Payment difficulties, or short-term financial hardship, occur where a change in a person's circumstances result in an inability to pay a rates or service charge debt.

Financial hardship occurs where a person is unable to pay rates and service charges without affecting their ability to meet their basic living needs, or the basic living needs of their dependants.



The Shire recognises the likelihood that COVID-19 will increase the occurrence of payment difficulties, financial hardship and vulnerability in our community. This policy is intended to apply to all ratepayers experiencing financial hardship regardless of their status, be they a property owner, tenant, business owner etc.

Financial hardship due to COVID-19

The Shire recognises many ratepayers are already experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19 and respects and anticipates the probability additional financial difficulties will arise when their rates are received.

The Shire will write to ratepayers at the time their account falls into arrears, to advise them of the terms of this policy and encourage eligible ratepayers to apply for hardship consideration.

Where possible and appropriate, the Shire will also provide contact information for a recognised financial counsellor and/or other relevant support services.

Financial hardship criteria

While evidence of hardship will be required (e.g., letter from financial counsellor/accountant/tax agent), the Shire recognises not all circumstances are alike and will take a flexible approach to a range of individual circumstances including, but not limited to, the following situations:

- Recent unemployment or under-employment sickness or recovery from sickness,
- Recent significant reduction in income or loss,
- Unanticipated circumstances such as caring for and supporting extended family.

Ratepayers are encouraged to provide any information about their individual circumstances which may be relevant for assessment. This may include demonstrating a capacity to make some payment and where possible, entering a payment proposal.

The Shire will consider all circumstances, applying the principles of fairness, integrity and confidentiality whilst complying our statutory responsibilities.

Payment arrangements

Payment arrangements facilitated in accordance with section 6.49 of the Act are of an agreed frequency and amount. These arrangements will consider the following:

- That a ratepayer has made genuine effort to meet rate and service charge obligations in the past,
- The payment arrangement will establish a known end date that is realistic and achievable,

- The ratepayer will be responsible for informing the Shire of any change in circumstance that jeopardises the agreed payment schedule.

In the case of severe financial hardship, we reserve the right to consider waiving additional charges or interest.

Interest charges

A ratepayer which meets the financial hardship criteria and enters into a payment arrangement may request a suspension or waiver of interest charges. Applications will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Deferment of rates

Deferment of rates may apply for ratepayers who have a Pensioner Card, State Concession Card or Seniors Card and Commonwealth Seniors Health Care Card registered on their property. The deferred rates balance:

- remains as a debt on the property until paid,
- becomes payable in full upon:
 - the passing of the pensioner
 - the property is sold, or
 - the pensioner ceasing to reside in the property,
- may be paid at any time, but the concession will not apply when the rates debt is subsequently paid (deferral forfeits the right to any concession entitlement), and
- does not incur penalty interest charges.

Debt recovery

We will suspend our debt recovery processes whilst negotiating a suitable payment arrangement with a debtor. Where a debtor is unable to make payments in accordance with the agreed payment plan and the debtor advises us and makes an alternative plan before defaulting on the 3rd due payment, then we will continue to suspend debt recovery processes.

Where a ratepayer has not reasonably adhered to the agreed payment plan, then for any rates and service charge debts which remain outstanding at the end of the financial year, we will offer the ratepayer one further opportunity of adhering to a payment plan that will clear the total debt by the end of the next financial year.

Rates and service charge debts remaining outstanding at the end of the additional period, will then be subject to the rates debt recovery procedures prescribed in the *Local Government Act 1995*.

Review

The Shire will establish a mechanism for review of decisions made under this policy and advise the applicant of their right to seek review and the procedure to be followed.

Communication and confidentiality

We will maintain confidential communications at all times, and we undertake to communicate with a nominated support person or other third party at your request.

We will advise ratepayers of this policy and its application, when communicating in any format (i.e., verbal or written) with a ratepayer that has an outstanding rates or service charge debt.

We recognise that applicants for hardship consideration are experiencing additional stressors and may have complex needs. We will provide additional time to respond to communication and will communicate in alternative formats where appropriate. We will ensure all communication with applicants is clear and respectful.

Definitions

Nil

Relevant policies/documents

Council Policy – Debt Recovery

Relevant legislation/local laws

Local Government Act 1995

Local Government (Financial Management) Regulations 1996

Local Government Amendment (COVID-19 Response) Act 2020

Office use only

Relevant delegations	Nil			
Council adoption	Date	11 October 2022	Resolution #	139/2022
Reviewed/modified	Date		Resolution #	
Next review due	Date	2024		