

Ergon Energy Retail Hardship Policy

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Purpose

Ergon Energy Queensland Pty Ltd (Ergon Energy Retail) is committed to providing effective assistance to customers who are experiencing difficulty paying their energy bills in a timely manner and has established the Customer Assist program for this purpose.

Introduction

This policy applies to all residential customers living in Regional Queensland who find it hard to pay their energy bills due to hardship.

You might experience hardship because of factors like:

- Death in the family
- Household illness
- Family violence
- Unemployment
- Reduced income

This policy explains:

- What we will do to help you manage your energy bills
- How we consider your circumstances and needs
- Your rights as a customer in our hardship program.

You can ask a support person to contact us, such as:

- A financial counsellor
- Someone who helps you manage your energy bills.

We need your permission to talk to your support person.

Hardship program overview

The Ergon Energy Customer Assist program offers a range of services and products to assist vulnerable customers to manage energy usage and payments, through customer case management, flexible payment arrangements and community and government partnerships. The aim is to provide a responsible program that prevents further financial hardship for the customer whilst being sustainable for Ergon Energy Retail.

Ergon Energy considers customer disconnection as a response for outstanding debt recovery is a last resort option and is therefore committed to supporting vulnerable customers who comply with program requirements to meet their energy usage debts on a sustainable and independent basis.

Communication and promotion of the Customer Assist program is actioned through various channels including marketing brochures, bill messages, contact centre scripting, website and community group partnerships.

Ergon Energy Retail adopted the Sustainable Payment Plan Framework (SPPF) in July 2016. The application of adopting the SPPF is to improve the quality of our capacity to pay conversations and create ongoing communication between the Ergon Energy Retail and customers who are experiencing

financial difficulty in an empathetic & respectful way, while offering flexibility and consistency.

Ergon Energy Retail has systems in place to enable us to meet the obligations with respect to hardship in the:

- Retail Law
- Retail Rules
- Guideline
- Ergon Energy Retail customer hardship policy.

Objectives

The key objectives of the Customer Assist program are:

- To facilitate the vulnerable customer's ability to manage their energy usage in an affordable and sustainable way
- To support customers to close the gap between energy usage and financial capacity by providing energy efficiency education
- To raise the criticality of the energy bill in customer financial commitment scale
- To encourage self-help strategies that are based on a shared responsibility model
- To deal with customers empathetically, respectfully and fairly
- To provide a low customer effort experience that equips and educates customers to be in a position that prevents the need for future assistance
- To recognise distinct hardship segments – short term, medium term, and long term.
- To respect the privacy and the personal information of our customers in accordance with the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles.

Hardship customer definition

Ergon Energy defines a Hardship customer as a residential customer who has the willingness to pay their energy bills as they fall due but has been either identified or presents as not having the financial capacity to keep to standard payment terms or payment plan terms over a sustained period.

Identification

Customer self-identification

Ergon Energy Retail aims to promote a dialogue with our customers to explore their capacity to pay for their ongoing energy needs. We support this by:

- Access to our program through calling our Contact Centre 13 10 46, Customer Assist direct on 1800 670 352 or seeking contact through our email address customerassist@ergon.com.au or via our online contact form.
- Provide information about our hardship program/policy to customers through multiple communication channels which is tailored to individual customer needs.
- Engaging in referrals from a financial counsellor, a community support worker or a member of the

community who is assigned by the customer as advocating on their behalf. You or your representative can provide a signed third party authority form and we will engage with your representative according to the instructions you provide.

What we will do to help you

We will tell you about our hardship program if:

- You tell us you are having trouble paying your bill
- You are referred to our program by a financial counsellor or other community worker
- We are concerned that you may be experiencing financial hardship.

All customers will be provided with a copy of Ergon Energy Retail's Hardship Policy at no charge via their preferred method of contact i.e. postage/email or by easily accessing Ergon Energy Retail's website at ergon.com.au/supportprograms.

Customers without internet access or living remotely are advised how to access support to pay their bills when experiencing financial difficulties through:

- Welcome communications sent via post or email after opening a new account
- A highly visible message on all customer bills
- Payment reminders sent if payment is not received by the due date.

Retailer identification

For those customers who do not self-identify, Ergon Energy Retail also uses a number of indicators to identify those customers who display characteristics of a customer experiencing financial difficulties. These indicators are identified via:

- Early Identification Proactive Reporting
- Agent Identification.

Early Identification - Proactive Reporting

Ergon Energy uses system reporting to identify customers who may be experiencing difficulty in paying their electricity bills, however, may not necessarily self-identify.

Customers identified by this process will receive communication from Ergon Energy Retail prompting if any assistance is needed with their account.

Agent Identification

Our staff are specially trained to help you with hardship. Staff will:

- Ask you a few questions about your circumstances
- Work out if you can join the hardship program.

We will assess your application for hardship assistance during the call.

We will recommend you speak to a staff member to help you join our hardship program if you have:

- A history of late payments
- Broken payment plans
- Requested payment extensions
- Received a disconnection warning notice

- Been disconnected for non-payment
- History of dishonoured direct debit payments
- Cancellation of Centrepay arrangements.

We can also support you to join our hardship program if you tell us:

- You are eligible for a relief grant or other emergency assistance
- You have personal circumstances where hardship support may help. For example, death in the family or job loss
- You may have trouble paying your bills for different reasons. Please contact us so we can discuss your individual situation.

Eligibility for the Customer Assist program

Eligibility assessment

When assessing eligibility, Customer Assist Officers take into consideration whether the customer has a current active account for their primary place of residence, has a willingness to pay their energy bills by their due date and has been identified, or presents as, not having the financial capacity to keep to standard payment terms or payment plan terms over a sustained period.

Ergon Energy Retail recognises three time-based hardship segments, and tailors products and services according to the relevant segmentation. During the initial discussion with the customer, Customer Assist Officers determine whether the customer's circumstances would be best served by short, medium or long term assistance.

Short term assistance will generally be handled at the first point of contact and will usually be in the form of, a payment plan and the forwarding of an application form for the State Government Home Energy Emergency Assistance Scheme.

Medium term and long term assistance will be provided via dedicated case management in the form of tailored payment plans, energy audit plans, financial counselling referrals, specialised government subsidy advice, together with ongoing supportive monitoring of usage and payment commitments.

If the Customer Assist officer/Program Specialist deems a customer ineligible to participate in the program, the customer will be provided the reason for ineligibility over the phone and via letter/email.

Participation in the Customer Assist program

Customer case management

Once the customer has been identified as eligible to participate in the Customer Assist program our Customer Assist officers will verbally advise the customer of their responsibilities as a program participant and seek their consent to comply with these requirements. The customer is also advised of the range of assistance that will be provided by the

program.

These details are formally posted/ emailed to the customer in a Customer Assist Welcome Pack, which includes details of the agreed payment arrangement, Customer Assist brochure (covering energy usage advice and running costs of all main electrical appliances), and information on available rebates and concessions.

In this package, customers are advised to contact the Customer Assist officers when their next bill is received to review the adequacy of their payment arrangement. On-going reviews are conducted to enable customers to re-negotiate their payment plans to accommodate changing circumstances. Reviews may be initiated by Ergon Energy Retail (i.e. scheduled according to program milestones, missed payment, higher usage, account in credit) or by customers themselves.

The Customer Assist officers strive to provide support in a respectful manner and stress the importance of the customer contacting them when required.

Early response

How we ensure you're supported!

Ergon Energy Retail provides early response interventions to customers experiencing hardship via proactive identification and prompt support once hardship is established.

We will let you know if you are accepted into our hardship program within 5 business days from receipt of the application. If you are accepted into our hardship program we will:

- Tell you if you are on the right energy plan or if there is a better plan for you
- Tell you about government concessions, relief schemes or energy rebates you may be able to receive
- Give you ideas about how to reduce your energy so it's more affordable
- Talk to you about a payment amount that suits your circumstances
- Immediately remove your account from any disconnection or debt recovery actions while you participate in the program
- Immediately remove your account from the shortened collection cycle.

We can send you a free copy of our hardship policy.

Ergon Energy has developed entry criteria, participation guidelines, exit, graduation and re-entry conditions for the Customer Assist program.

Entry criteria – includes the assessment of both circumstantial indicators and financial capacity of the customer.

Circumstantial indicators

- The customer has a current active account which is in arrears for their primary place of residence
- The customer has been, either identified or presents, as not having the financial capacity to

keep to standard payment terms or payment plan terms over a sustained period

- The customer is experiencing financial difficulties as a result of experiencing life changing events or ongoing embedded disadvantage.

Financial capacity

The financial capacity of the customer is measured by the ability of the customer to meet the value of the regular payment to cover the expected future usage plus the amount required to clear outstanding debt within the timeframe of the payment arrangement.

Participation guidelines

Customers are advised of and are asked to agree to our participation guidelines upon acceptance into the program:

- To work with Ergon Energy Retail to determine customer capacity to pay and to develop an agreed payment plan
- To pay the amounts set out in the agreed payment schedule on the due dates
- To advise Ergon Energy Retail of any change in circumstance that may impact customer ability to make payments
- To keep Ergon Energy Retail updated with latest phone and email contact details
- To respond to the Customer Assist teams attempts to contact you to review your Customer Assist Package

Payment options

A key objective when setting up payment plans or arrangements with customers is to keep the customer connected and committed to working towards long term energy bill management. Ergon Energy Retail encourages conversations that reach realistic and achievable payment amounts that are tailored to be considerate of customer circumstances as well as commercial obligations. In dealing with customer's experiencing payment difficulties, Ergon Energy Retail will take into account all of the circumstances of the customer and act reasonably and fairly in these circumstances.

When you are in our hardship program, we will offer you flexible payment options to suit your individual situation. To make your payment plan, we will consider:

- How much you can pay
- How much you owe
- How much energy we expect you will use in the next 12 months.

This will help us figure out a payment plan that is right for you.

We will offer a payment plan to suit your situation. This will include payments to cover:

- What you owe
- An amount to cover your energy use.

Once we agree to a payment plan, we will send you

information including:

- Who you can contact for more help
- How long the payment plan will go for
- The amount you will pay each time
- How many payments you need to make
- When you need to make your payments (this is also called the frequency of payments)
- How we worked out your payments.

You can choose to use Centrepay, if you are eligible.

Centrepay is a free service you can use to help pay your bills. Centrepay can automatically take an amount of money from your Centrelink payments to go toward energy bills and expenses.

We will see if another energy plan may be better for you. If you agree, we can transfer you to a better energy plan for free.

Depending on the rules of our hardship policy, we may be able to remove some debt, fees or charges you owe.

If you miss a payment, we will contact you to see if you need help. We will contact you by SMS, letter or email.

What we will do

There are different payment options available to hardship customers including:

- Payment plans – regular instalments, agreed with the customer, and established having regard to the customer's capacity to pay, any arrears owing by the customer and the customer's expected energy consumption needs over the following 12 month period.
- Centrepay – a free service for customers who are in receipt of Centrelink benefits and this service allows customers to pay bills as regular deductions from their Centrelink payments. As part of the Customer Assist program, this service can be arranged over the phone in consultation with the customer.
- Incentivised payment plans – Ergon Energy may provide an incentive payment (partial or full debt waiver) in specific conditions where the customer has reached the financial position of meeting their energy usage. This incentive payment serves to incentivise customers to maintain their payment plans after graduation from the program.
- Direct Debit – set up through the account or via a customer's financial institution
- BPAY – details provided on the bill
- Cash or credit card via Australia Post – through post office centres and agents
- Credit card – via telephones
- Cheque or money order from a financial institution – via post.

What you must do

Tell us if your situation changes and you can no longer make the payments in your plan. We can then review your payment arrangements.

Tell us if your contact details change. We may stop helping you if you:

- Stop making payments under your plan

- Do not tell us when your contact details change.

If you have had two payment plans cancelled in the last 12 months because you did not follow your plan:

- We do not have to offer you another plan
- We might disconnect your energy.

Other supports to help you pay your energy bills

Depending on the state or territory you live in, there are other supports to help you pay your energy bills.

What we will do

We will tell you about other ways you can get help to pay your energy bill, such as:

- Government relief schemes (Home Energy
- Emergency Assistance)
- Energy Rebates (PCC, HCC DVA Health Card, Qld Seniors' Card, Immicard)
- Concession programs (Medical Cooling & Heating Concession Scheme)
- Financial counselling services.

What we need you to do

If you find you are eligible for these programs, let us know as soon as possible so we can help you.

Our programs and services

As a hardship customer, you can access a range of programs and services to help you:

- Referral to Community organisations within your area is considered in determining a sustainable payment plan which does not negatively impact the maintenance of a basic standard of living
- Electricity Life Support Concession Scheme
- Disaster relief funding grants and Drought relief payments
- Home Energy Saver Scheme
- Energy Savvy Families Program.

What we will do

We will consider your individual situation to find the right programs (e.g. concession programs) or services that meet your needs.

We will work with you

If you have joined our hardship program, we will not:

- Charge late payment fees
- Require a security deposit
- Make changes to your plan without your agreement. For example, we will not put you on a shortened collection cycle unless you agree first.

We can help you save energy

Using less energy can save you money.

What we will do

When you join our hardship program, we can give you tips to use less energy. This can be different depending on the state or territory you live in.

During our initial telephone contact with customers, Customer Assist officers help customers understand where energy usage could be reduced and how this would progress customers towards sustainable energy affordability.

In the Customer Assist program package, energy efficiency brochures are provided, as well as references to Ergon Energy on line audit tools. Where it is considered that energy usage is excessively above average usage for the customer demographic profile, a meter test will be recommended. In these circumstances, a more intensive household energy audit is completed.

We want to check you have the right energy plan.

What we will do

When you join our hardship program, we will talk to you about your energy use and whether you are on the right plan.

If we think there is a better energy plan for you, we will:

- Explain why the plan is better
- Ask if you'd like to transfer to the new plan for free.

We will only talk to you about energy plans we can offer.

Graduation conditions

All actions of the Customer Assist program will be focused on supporting hardship customers to graduate from the program equipped to understand the high priority of the energy bill and to implement strategies that ensure their energy bills are sustainably affordable.

Graduation will occur when a customer has a nil or credit balance and /or is in a position to meet current and future commitments to energy usage as indicated by payment history. Customers will be advised by a congratulatory letter/email once they have reached these milestones and encouraged to maintain their focus on matching their usage with their affordable payments.

Exit conditions

A customer will be removed from the Customer Assist program where there is non-compliance with the participation responsibilities as above. (i.e. absence of reasonable attempts to meet responsibilities). The Customer Assist program Officers attempt to contact customers who are at risk of exiting the program via telephone, SMS, mail (unable to contact letter) or email (if applicable). In the event that none of these channels are successful, a further letter is sent advising of their removal from the program and that the customer will be responsible for managing their own payments and will be subject to the normal debt collection processes. Where a customer has been removed from the program for non-compliance, the customer may still be eligible for a payment plan by calling 13 10 46.

Ergon Energy Retail reserves the right to limit re-entry to the program where customers have a history of non-compliance with the Customer Assist program participation responsibilities.

Re-entry conditions

Where a previously exited Customer Assist program customer re-applies for participation on the program, the Customer Assist team will assess whether the customer meets the entry criteria and whether the customer has committed to a regular payment method.

Staff training

The Customer Assist team have fully documented procedures supporting the Ergon Energy Queensland Pty Ltd Hardship Policy and participate in a range of training courses covering hardship awareness, communication and empathy skills, energy efficiency and relevant legislative changes.

The team participate in Financial First Aid, Mental Health Awareness, Domestic Violence and Conflict Resolution courses.

All customer focused agents participate in regular empathy training and hardship awareness training, assisting them to identify the triggers of hardship and how to work with customers experiencing hardship.

Customer Solutions (call centre) staff are trained and receive regular hardship refresher training, to initiate conversations with customers in a way that will raise awareness of our program and offer participation in the program.

Training is regularly reviewed and updated on an annual or as needs basis.

Ongoing support tools

Ergon Energy Retail is committed to providing ongoing support tools for Regional Queensland Customers by:

- Continuing to offer payment arrangements for customer through our Customer Solutions Centre
- Offering tips and hints to continue to reduce their usage
- Continued access to government rebates
- Access to My Account.

Complaints and compliance management

Ergon Energy Retail manages complaints in accordance with AS/NZS 110002:2014- Guidelines for complaints handling in organisations and aims to resolve customer complaints at the first point of contact between the Customer Assist team and the customer. However, where this has not been achieved, the customer is offered the opportunity to escalate their concerns to our internal escalated complaints team via email at customerresponse@ergon.com.au

Ergon Energy Retail manages complaints in

accordance with AS/NZS I 10002:2014– Guidelines for complaints handling in organisations and aims to resolve customer complaints at the first point of contact between the Customer Assist Program team and the customer. However, where this has not been achieved, the customer is offered the opportunity to escalate their concerns to our internal escalated complaints team via the following email – customerresponse@ergon.com.au

If, after we provide a resolution for you, you are not satisfied that the outcome is equitable or that we have not done everything in our power to deliver a fair outcome, you may request escalation of the matter to our internal Dispute Resolution Advisory Team. This team will investigate the matter further and propose possible alternative options.

If you are still dissatisfied after working with our internal Dispute Resolution Advisory Team, you may escalate externally to the Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland:

- Phone: 1800 662 837 (freecall)
- Online: ewoq.com.au
- Email: to complaints@ewoq.com.au
- In writing to:
Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland (EWOQ)
PO Box 3640, South Brisbane BC QLD 4101

The Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland is an independent body established by the Queensland Government to investigate and resolve complaints and disputes between energy retailers and distributors and energy customers using up to 100MWh of electricity per annum. This is typically households and many small businesses.

Ergon Energy Queensland Pty Ltd (EEQ) proactively seeks to meet its legal obligations to customers in hardship by designing a framework to identify, assess and manage these obligations with reference to the International Standard (ISO) 19600 Compliance Management Systems – Guidelines.

Privacy

Ergon Energy is committed to protecting the personal information of our customers in accordance with the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles.

We use a range of security mechanisms and procedures to protect your personal information and will take all reasonable measures to ensure that your personal information is stored securely both in electronic and physical forms.

References

- National Energy Retail Law
- National Energy Retail Rules
- National Energy Retail Law (Qld) Regulation 2014
- Guidance on AER Approval of Customer Hardship Policies
- Privacy Act 1988 (Commonwealth)
- AS/NZS10002:2014 Guidelines for complaints handling in organizations.

Definitions

All terms defined in body of policy.

Enforcement

Under National Energy Retail Law, energy retailers must develop, seek approval of, maintain and implement a customer hardship policy.

Contact us

Having trouble paying your electricity bill, contact us by phoning 13 10 46.

Experiencing Financial difficulty, call our Customer Assist team on 1800 670 652

National Relay Service

If you have a hearing or speech impairment, you can contact us through the National Relay Service (NRS). To make a relay call through NRS all you need to do is:

- Contact the NRS via the contact number below or detail on the NRS national web page
- Give the Ergon Energy number you want to call.

Speak and Listen number: 1300 555 727
TTY number: 133 677
SMS relay number: 0423 677 767

For more information, visit the NRS website communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/services-people-disability/accesshub

Translating and interpreting service

If you need assistance from someone in a language other than English, you can contact us by calling 1300 607 555 and selecting the language required.