Customer Hardship Policy
Customer Hardship Policy

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Customer Hardship Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE
At Starcorp Energy, we understand our customers can experience financial hardship from time-to-time and may need additional assistance and flexibility. Our Hardship Policy has been created to assist you to manage your energy usage and costs where and when it may be required.

OBJECTIVE
A consistent and reliable source of electricity is essential for our customers. At Starcorp Energy we believe that financial hardship should not preclude customers from supply if they are willing to pay their bills but require some payment flexibility. Aim is to empower our customers to support themselves in a sustainable fashion.

We have an engaging and consultative approach to hardship. We will undertake to educate our customers in ways that can conserve and limit energy usage.

To that end we will handle each case with respect and take time to understand our customers’ needs in the instance of financial hardship. We will:

• treat customers with sensitivity and empathy
• ensure payment arrangements are fair, flexible and affordable
• review agreements regularly
• provide customers with information about relevant government grants and concessions
• provide customers with information energy efficiency practise
• maintain strong relationships with customers and other interested parties
• provide ongoing training for our staff in dealing with hardship matters.

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

Customers 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 customers manage their energy bills
• how we consider customer circumstances and needs
• customers rights in our hardship program.

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

• a financial counsellor
• someone who helps customers manage their energy bills.

We need the customers permission to talk to their support person.
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2. WHAT IS HARDSHIP?

We consider hardship as customers who are willing to meet their contractual obligations, but do not have the financial capacity to do so. In this document, we have defined two types of customer hardship: short- and long-term hardship.

SHORT-TERM HARDSHIP
Customers experiencing short-term hardship are undergoing a sudden change in circumstance, which has resulted in temporary financial difficulty. These customers generally require flexibility and temporary assistance, such as an extension of time to pay, or flexible payment arrangements.

LONG-TERM HARDSHIP
Customers experiencing long-term hardship have generally resulted from a combination of a change in circumstances or an unforeseen event, and may require a more formalised account management approach and additional assistance under which a customer’s payment plan may be revised over a longer period.

3. FAIR ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Starcorp Energy is committed to fair access to our Hardship Policy. Our policy is transparent and applied consistently. At no cost, a copy of our Hardship Policy is available on request by either phoning our customer service team on 1800 420 600 or by downloading directly from our website www.starcorpenergy.com.au

4. CUSTOMER’S RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

Starcorp Energy’s Team will inform customers entering our hardship arrangements of their rights and obligations by letter and or email.

Starcorp Energy considers the following as customer rights:
- to be treated with sensitivity and empathy
- to negotiate an affordable payment plan
- to renegotiate instalment payments
- to receive information on relevant grants and concessions
- to receive information on efficient energy use
- to not be disconnected whilst actively participating in an agreed arrangement
- to pay for their energy consumption in advance or in arrears by instalment payments
- to use Centrepay as a payment option
- to use Centrepay with any new or altered contract

Starcorp Energy considers the following as customer obligations:
- to contact Starcorp Energy when experiencing a change in circumstance before going into arrears
- to contact Starcorp Energy when unable to make payments according to the agreed arrangements before going into arrears
- to stay in touch with our team as per agreement between Starcorp Energy and customer
5. **HARDSHIP PROGRAM**

Starcorp Energy approaches hardship with sensitivity and flexibility. We treat our customers as individuals, recognising that circumstances differ from case to case, and therefore our responses reflect the multitude of stresses that result in hardship.

We work to identify customers in hardship and we respond with flexible payment options, and information on grants and other assistance programs. While participating in agreed arrangement, our customers’ participation are reviewed regularly.

Starcorp Energy’s approach to hardship is to ensure that customers who make agreements are protected from further credit and collection activity while they adhere to the agreement. We will advise customers in writing and or email at the commencement of this agreement what the terms of the agreement are and what will happen should they not adhere to the agreement. Starcorp Energy will not disconnect any customer while they are actively participating in our hardship program.

Starcorp Energy has systems in place to enable to meet our obligations with respect to customer hardship in:

- the Retail Law, and
- the Retail Rules, and
- this Guideline, and
- the retailer’s customer hardship policy

**WHAT WE WILL DO TO HELP?**

Starcorp Energy customers who are experiencing temporary or long-term financial difficulty and having trouble paying their bills. We will tell customers 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.

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

- a history of late payments
- broken payment plans
- requested payment extensions
- received a disconnection warning notice
- been disconnected for non-payment.

We can also support customers to join our hardship program if:

- 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.

Customers may have trouble paying your bills for different reasons. Please contact us so we can discuss your individual situation.
Our staff are specially trained to help customers with hardship. Our 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 within 7 days of receipt.

We will let customers know if they are accepted into our hardship program within 10 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 use
- talk to you about a payment amount that suits your circumstances.

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

**ACTIVE ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT OF HARDSHIP**

If a customer has voluntarily contacted us, or has been identified as experiencing hardship, Starcorp Energy’s active response is as follows:

- the customer will be referred to a team member or account manager within 24 hours of initial contact
- the team member or account manager will review the appropriateness of the customer’s contract
- the case manager will advise the customer of the following:
  - assistance options
  - energy efficiency information
  - payment plans
- Our customer will be sent a letter confirming their entering into an arrangement.

**ASSESSING CAPACITY TO PAY**

Starcorp Energy establishes reasonable and manageable payment agreements. When we are assessing capacity to pay, we take into account a customer’s ability to maintain a minimum standard of living and we measure a customer’s income against other financial commitments and basic living expenses. We take into account any arrears owing and the customer’s expected energy consumption over a 12-month period. We also measure a customer’s capacity to pay against their energy usage, and employ strategies to help customers reduce their usage if it is unsustainable.

We will take into consideration a financial counsellor’s statements about a customer’s capacity to pay.
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6. DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT ENERGY PLAN

When you join our hardship program, we will talk to you about your energy use and whether you are on the right plan. Our customer’s account manager will review the appropriateness of a customer’s contract upon entry into an agreement. Our staff will only talk to you about energy plans we can offer and will bear in mind: 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
- cost effectiveness
- previous tariff (including network charge)
- overall power usage (Using less energy can save you money)
- previous bills (if applicable)
- other relevant information provided by the customer

7. HARDSHIP PAYMENT OPTIONS

There are different payment options available to hardship customers, including:

- payment plans
- Centrepay.

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 the 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.
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Depending on the rules in 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 first by phone, then by email then by 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.

**A. FLEXIBLE PAYMENT OPTIONS**

Flexible payment options are short-term extensions granted when a customer advises they can’t pay their current account on time. These arrangements are usually offered to customers experiencing short-term financial difficulty as a result of an unexpected but short-term change in income and/or expenditure. In these instances, payment extensions/arrangements allow the customer the flexibility to pay-off the account in either a lump sum or instalments prior to the next bill being issued.

**B. STARCORP ENERGY INSTALMENT PLAN**

Starcorp Energy Instalment Plan is a structured payment plan designed to encourage customers to budget for the cost of their energy use and any accumulated arrears over a given period. The aim is to assist manage ongoing power supply without disruption. Based on our billing model, customers can pay for their annual fees in equal instalments either fortnightly or monthly.

In setting up the instalment plan, Starcorp Energy will discuss with the customer the circumstances surrounding entry into the Hardship Program, other financial commitments they may have and any support they are entitled to under government funded schemes, concessions and rebates.

When considering a customer’s capacity to pay Starcorp Energy will review:

- any income they are receiving
- any support they are receiving or are entitled to
- their various personal, household and other expenses
- any dependents that rely on them for either income or any other form of support
- any likely change to their income and expenditure over the next twelve months
- any other financial commitments
- any report from a financial counsellor or other authorised third party on capacity to pay
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PAYMENT PLANS
To ensure an appropriate payment plan is calculated, Starcorp Energy will take into account the estimated usage and amount needed to clear arrears over an agreed amount of time period. The length of the payment plan will be dependent on the nature of the hardship, the level of debt and the customer’s capacity to pay. Starcorp Energy will have regard to a customer’s expected energy consumption over the following 12 months when establishing a payment arrangement. Starcorp Energy will support customers who are actively participating in the Hardship Program by not imposing further debt in these circumstances. This includes, no security deposits or early exit fee’s will be taken or requested from the customer.

Customers will receive by letter and or email;
- duration of payment plan
- amounts to be paid
- frequency of payments
- number of instalment payments
- payment method
- how plan was calculated
- contact details of account consultant

Under this payment plan a customer’s account will be reviewed monthly at no cost to the customer by the account consultant in charge of that account. The account consultant will contact the customer if an arrangement becomes unsuitable. At Starcorp Energy we want to ensure that customers are treated with respect and courtesy. A customer may contact the account consultants supervisor at any time if they are unhappy with the way the account consultant is managing the account under the Hardship Program.

8. MONITORING AND REVIEWING PAYMENT PLANS
Starcorp Energy will review a payment arrangement if informed by a customer that circumstances have changed. We recognise not all customers will contact us directly and our staff will contact each customer on payment arrangement at least once every three months to confirm their payment continues to be appropriate, affordable and sustainable.

If a customer is paying less than their usage and accumulating debt, our staff will monitor the customer’s account and make contact more frequently. We encourage customers to make payments that, at the very least, cover their usage.

9. 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.
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10. DISCONNECTION
At Starcorp Energy, our aim is to avoid disconnection and we will not disconnect any customer while they are actively participating in an agreement arrangement.

While every effort is made to assist customers on the hardship program and maintain supply, there are circumstances where a customer may be returned to regular debt management.

Customers on the Hardship Program will not be disconnected for debt; however, a customer that does not fulfil their obligations may be returned to regular debt management and can potentially be disconnected under the guidelines of the National Energy Retail Law. Disconnection of a customer due to their inability to pay energy bills will be an absolute last resort option. The success of the program is dependent on the co-operation of both parties and this includes a willingness to keep to the payment arrangement as agreed with the account consultant.

11. NON-COMPLIANCE WITH PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS
Customers who do not adhere to agreed payment plans will be contacted and managed in accordance with regulatory obligations under the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF).

12. ENERGY EFFICIENCY - WE CAN HELP YOU SAVE MONEY
When you join our hardship program, Starcorp Energy’s staff can work with customers to identify energy consumption trends. Using less energy can save you money. This can be different depending on the state or territory you live in.

Information provided to customers over the phone or in person will be supported by reporting and advice supplied via Starcorp Energy.

13. CUSTOMERS ELIGIBLE FOR THE HARDSHIP AGREEMENT
We will review a range of indicators and go through the following process to determine whether a customer is eligible hardship.

• self-identification
• a history of late or missed payments
• a sudden change in payment patterns
• a need for extensions on payments due
• outstanding debt
• eligibility for concessions, government pensions or payments or rebates including NewStart and Disability Pension payments
• loss or change in employment
• increased cost of living
• personal loss
• other debts
• temporary or permanent disability

If a customer is experiencing any of the above indicators Starcorp Energy would determine that they would be eligibility for our Hardship Program.
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In addition

A customer will not be able to enter our Customer Hardship Program if they:

- have debt incurred via fraudulent or illegal activity;
- have been dishonest in describing their circumstances.

14. COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS IN HARDSHIP

As part of Starcorp Energy’s initial identification of customers undergoing hardship/difficulties, we communicate our approach to customers who have not paid their energy bills on time and have been sent reminders.

- when a customer enters an agreement
- when a customer’s account is reviewed
- when there is a change in agreed payment plan or a change in energy use
- when there is a late payment or no payment

Customers participating in an agreed arrangement are obliged to communicate with Starcorp Energy to ensure appropriate account management or risk removal from an agreement.

Starcorp Energy will communicate our hardship policy and information to customers about our hardship assistance options, including their rights and obligations, via phone calls, face to face, via our website (www.starcorpenergy.com.au). We will also promote and publicise our policy by:

- including a message on our bills;
- providing a description of our policy on our website and a link to this policy; and
- including a brochure of our policy in our Welcome Pack.

Where a customer has requested a representative to act on their behalf, Starcorp Energy will engage with the customer’s representative as they would the customer and consistent with the customer’s consent and instructions to Starcorp Energy.

If you are a customer with a disability, you can contact the national relay services by calling: 133 677 for TTY users, or 1300 555 727 for speak and Listen, then state that you want to contact Starcorp Energy on 1800 420 600.

15. CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Starcorp Energy is committed to providing services to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and to provide access to our hardship program. We will work with community organisations to provide resources and bilingual training in efficient energy use for people from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

If a customer has difficulty with English, an interpreter service is available, at no cost to the customer, on 1300 622 718.
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16. LITERACY

Starcorp Energy recognises that some customers may have trouble with literacy. Starcorp Energy is committed to providing energy efficiency resources for customers with literacy issues.

17. TRAINING

STAFF

Starcorp Energy educates our staff to identify and work empathetically and non-judgementally with customers in hardship. Our training covers issues relating to financial hardship, identification and referral processes and protocols, and respectful communication with customers. We provide ongoing refresher training as required and when we learn new information related to our service delivery.

18. REPORTING

Starcorp Energy will report to relevant government licensing agencies on agreed hardship assistance performance indicators.

19. COMPLAINTS

Starcorp Energy works to resolve complaints at a customer’s first point of contact. If this is not possible, it will be escalated to our Senior Management Team. To make a complaint, customers can phone 1800 420 600 or via our website at www.starcorpenergy.com.au

Customers who are unhappy with the outcome of the enquiry into their complaint can contact their state Energy Ombudsman, an independent, free service.

QUEENSLAND

Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland Telephone: 1800 662 837
Website: www.ewoq.com.au

NEW SOUTH WALES

Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW Telephone: 1800 246 545
Website: www.ewon.com.au

20. GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Government Programs and Assistance, as a hardship customer, you can access a range of programs and services to help you:

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

If you meet certain criteria you may be eligible for government programs which provide financial assistance to people having difficulty paying their energy accounts.
We can discuss these options with you. In QLD and NSW a range of assistance is available, please see below for details;

QUEENSLAND
Queensland customers can access the following concessions and assistance:
• Electricity Concession
• Electricity Life Support Concession Scheme
• Medical Cooling and Heating Electricity Concession
• Home Energy Emergency Assistance (HEAA)
• Seniors Electricity Rebates

For further information, phone 13 74 68 or visit www.communities.qld.gov.au

NEW SOUTH WALES
NSW customers can access the following grants and rebates:
• NSW Low Income Household Rebate
• Life Support Rebates
• Medical Energy Rebate
• Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA)

For further information, visit www.trade.nsw.gov.au

OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES TO HELP YOU PAY YOUR ENERGY BILL
We can provide you with information on support services that may be able to assist you depending on the state or territory you live in, there are other supports to help you pay your energy bills. Our team would be happy to conduct a three way call to the relevant authority depending on your eligibility and jurisdiction.

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
• energy rebates
• concession programs
• financial counselling services.

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

21. PRIVACY
Starcorp Energy is committed to respecting the privacy and protecting the personal information of our customers in accordance with the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and the National Privacy Principles.
22. CONTACT DETAILS

Customers experiencing hardship can contact Starcorp Energy’s team from:

- 8.30am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday on 1800 420 600
- enquiries@starcorpenergy.com.au
- PO BOX 377 Kippa Ring QLD 4021

A copy of Starcorp Energy’s Hardship Policy can be downloaded at -

Alternatively, a free copy can be posted upon request by contacting Starcorp Energy on 1800 420 600

23. REVIEW

The Policy will be formally reviewed annually in accordance with changing business and or legal requirements.