

# Customer Assistance Framework



Ausgrid recognises there are members of the community who may be experiencing challenging life circumstances. These people may require assistance and support to meet their obligation to comply with Ausgrid directions for network maintenance or rectification work on private property and liability for damages to our network.



## Identification of customers eligible for support

From time to time, some of our residential customers (**customer/s**) who have debt with us may experience difficulties in their lives. As a customer-centric organisation, we have an obligation to provide assistance wherever possible.

Ausgrid defines customers as being vulnerable, in financial hardship or stress when they are willing to meet a financial obligation to Ausgrid but do not have the capacity to do so.

We understand the cost of complying with our directions for maintenance or rectification works on privately owned electricity infrastructure, under our bushfire risk mitigation program, payment of damages to Ausgrid and the rental of tiger tail safety equipment, can be significant.

As we typically do not have a regular payment history from customers who are liable for these costs, we do not know their capacity to pay. As a result, customers often need to self-identify as being in vulnerable circumstances, such as financial hardship.

To assist customers to self-identify as being in financial hardship and eligible for assistance, Ausgrid has defined the following factors as indicators that could be self-assessed. The customer may be experiencing one or more of these factors:

- reliance on government assistance or Centrelink payments such as a pension
- unemployment
- medical illness/injury, mental health or addictive behavioural issues of the customer or a dependent, affecting their capacity to pay
- physical or intellectual disability of the customer or dependent affecting their capacity to pay
- death in the family affecting capacity to pay
- change in the family unit affecting capacity to pay
- domestic or family violence
- sudden loss of income or substantial reduction in income, long term fixed low income or
- natural calamity such as fire, flood, drought, or storm damage.

In addition to traditional indicators, the amount of the payment required, and unexpectedness of the amount compared to the customers capacity to pay may also warrant the consideration of financial hardship.

The indicators defined in this framework to assist self-identification are not exhaustive, and customers experiencing personal circumstances affecting their capacity to pay are encouraged to contact Ausgrid directly.

## Types of support available

If you have been identified as being vulnerable, in financial hardship or stress, Ausgrid will aim to contact you within 10 business days to provide access to meaningful and appropriate assistance based on the customer's circumstances.

### Advice and Information

Customers can contact Ausgrid to seek further information regarding maintenance or rectification works. Ausgrid will provide information on technicality, cost, and time periods in which works need to be completed.

Advice may also include referral to welfare and financial counselling organisation's who can assist customers in suggesting ways to improve their financial situation as well as providing information and assistance with concessions, grant eligibility and referrals for material aid.

### Flexible payment options

Ausgrid will negotiate and agree interest-free payment plans for customers allowing them to pay off outstanding debts/damages costs over an agreed period.

When developing a payment plan, Ausgrid recognises that customers need to be managed individually, requiring negotiation and flexibility. When assessing a customer's capacity to pay, Ausgrid will take into consideration the amount of the debt, and the ability for the customer to make repayments based on their individual circumstances. Payment plan arrangements will not compromise the customers' ability to maintain a basic standard of living for themselves and their dependents.

### Contribution to rectification works

In instances where a customer has been issued with a bushfire defect notice and is unable to complete the rectification works due to financial hardship or stress Ausgrid will perform the works for the customer and bill to recover the costs.

In addition to offering flexible payment plans Ausgrid may, in exceptional circumstances, waive part or all the rectification costs.

### Government concession programs and financial counselling services

Ausgrid will maintain a list of Welfare Organisation's and Financial Counselling Services to refer customers in financial hardship. Ausgrid will refer customers to the appropriate Government Department and their Energy Retailer to ensure they are aware of relevant assistance available in the form of Government concessions.

Support resources can be found on our [website](#).

## Customer rights and obligations

### Customer's rights

- To be treated in a respectful and professional manner;
- Confidentiality is maintained at all times;
- To have options, information and support clearly explained;
- To have the health, safety and wellbeing of themselves and their dependents foremost in the negotiation of payment arrangements; and
- To be protected from debt recovery or legal action while meeting agreed arrangements.

## Customer's obligations

- To acknowledge the debt and obligation to repay;
- To provide Ausgrid any reasonable evidence, as requested, to assist with the assessment of financial hardship and capacity to pay;
- To advise Ausgrid if your contact details or financial circumstances materially change; and
- To notify Ausgrid if you are unable to meet agreed payments or terms.

## Protection from disconnection

Disconnection of supply to connected customers in our network is a last resort in order to protect public safety or when all other remedies under this framework have been exhausted.

If a customer is deemed to be in financial hardship, Ausgrid will seek agreement of a payment plan with the customer and proceed to rectify the bushfire defect/risk or damage to the network, and not disconnect supply.

## Complaint resolution

We want to do everything we can to make sure our support mechanisms work for our customers and will do what we can to resolve your concerns.

If a customer is not satisfied with the assessment, they may request a review or make a complaint in accordance with Ausgrid's *Standard complaint and dispute resolution procedure* which may be found on Ausgrid's website.

Complaint escalations can be made through Energy and Water Ombudsman of New South Wales (EWON) if satisfactory resolution is not achieved.

## Communication and promotion

Ausgrid encourages self-identification of financial hardship and vulnerability by:

- referencing information regarding the Customer Assistance Framework in the notification documentation to customers regarding bushfire hazard reduction activity or network damage to be rectified;
- referencing information regarding the Customer Assistance Framework in the notification of cost of network damages to the liable party;
- publishing the Customer Assistance Framework on Ausgrid's website; and
- ensuring that employees who address queries from customers who have received network defect rectification or damages notices are skilled in identifying potential financial hardship.

For more information visit our [website](#).



Interpreter service 131 450