

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP POLICY

Policy Objective

To give effect to the Shire's commitment to support the whole community to meet the unprecedented challenges arising from a declared State of Emergencies, the Shire of Kent recognises that these challenges may result in financial hardship or ratepayers or debtors of the Shire.

This Policy is intended to ensure that the Shire offers fair, equitable, consistent and dignified support to ratepayers suffering hardship, while treating all members of the community with respect and understanding at this difficult time.

Policy Scope

This policy applies to:

1. Outstanding rates and service charges as at the date of adoption of this policy; and
2. Rates and service charges levied during any period where a declared State of Emergency is in force.

It is a reasonable community expectation, as the Shire deals with the effects of the any declared State of Emergency that those with the capacity to pay rates will continue to do so. For this reason the 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* and *Local Government (Financial Management) Regulations 1996* will apply.

Policy Statement

1 Payment difficulties, hardship and vulnerability

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 of Kent recognises the likelihood that a declared State of Emergency 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.

2 Financial Hardship Criteria

While evidence of hardship will be required, the Shire recognises that 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
- Low income or loss of income
- Unanticipated circumstances such as caring for and supporting extended family

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

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

3 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 Kent of any change in circumstance that jeopardises the agreed payment schedule.

In the case of severe financial hardship, the Shire reserves the right to consider waiving additional charges or interest (excluding the late payment interest applicable to the Emergency Services Levy).

4 Interest Charges

A ratepayer that 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.

5 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 or if the property is sold or if the pensioner ceases 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.

6 Debt recovery

Debt recovery processes may be suspended 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 the Shire 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 that remain outstanding on 1 July 2021, the Shire will offer the ratepayer one further opportunity of adhering to a payment plan that will clear the total debt by the end of the 2021/2022 financial year.

Rates and service charge debts that remain outstanding at the end of the said financial year, will then be subject to the rates debt recovery procedures prescribed in the *Local Government Act 1995*.

7 Review

The Shire will advise ratepayers or debtors of all decisions made under this policy, and advise them of their right to seek review by the full Council.

8 Communication and Confidentiality

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

The Shire 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.

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

First Adopted: 15 April 2020
Resolution: Ordinary Council Meeting OCM1920/142
Amended: