

Rates Hardship Council Policy

Responsible directorate: Corporate Services

Objective: This Policy is intended to ensure that the City offers fair, equitable, consistent, respectful and dignified support to ratepayers experiencing financial hardship.

1. Statement:

The City of Joondalup recognises that it has a responsibility to respond to the needs of ratepayers experiencing financial hardship due to a change in circumstances affecting their ability to meet their rates payment obligations.

2. Details:

2.1. Financial hardship:

Financial hardship is considered to exist where a ratepayer is either unable to settle their rates obligations using normal payment options or cannot enter into payment arrangements without significantly affecting their ability to meet their, or their dependents', basic living needs.

Factors contributing to financial hardship may include, but are not limited to:

- Unemployment or underemployment.
- Loss of income.
- Serious illness or recovery from serious illness.
- Impact of natural disaster (e.g. fire, flood, etc).
- Other difficult circumstances.

2.2. Eligible ratepayers:

This policy applies to ratepayers who are individual persons and does not apply to corporate, non-profit, or other ratepayers who are not individuals.

2.3. Process:

Following receipt of the annual rates notice, where ratepayers do not believe they are able to meet their rates payment obligations due to financial hardship either by:

- a. payment of the total amount in full by the due date stipulated in the rates notice;
- b. payment by the total amount by one of the instalment options provided in the rates notice; or
- c. payment of the total amount by entering into a weekly, fortnightly or monthly payment arrangement by 31 March of that rating year;

such ratepayers are invited to contact the City at the earliest, using the contact details provided in the rates notice or on the City's website.

When ratepayers contact the City to advise they are experiencing financial hardship and may not be able to meet their rates payment obligations using any of the standard payment options available, the City's standard approach is to:

- a. Work with the ratepayer to consider the ratepayer's financial position as advised.
- b. Offer payment arrangements that may extend payment timelines beyond 31 March of that rating year, including up to 30 June of the rating year.
- c. Where it may be necessary to consider payment arrangements that extend beyond 30 June, offer the ratepayer a payment arrangement that includes an appropriate estimate of the following year's rates and charges and extends the payment period up to 31 March of the following rating year. Depending on specific circumstances, the City may extend this even further.
- d. In some situations, consider offering a payment arrangement with significantly reduced initial payments to accommodate the ratepayer's current financial position, and then review the situation regularly (every few weeks or months, as appropriate) with the ratepayer. Where the ratepayer's situation subsequently improves, the City then works with the ratepayer to update the payment amounts to enable settlement of the dues sooner, which may include consultation with a financial counsellor if the City considers this is warranted.
- e. Refer the ratepayer, where none of the offered payment options are suitable for the ratepayer, or if the ratepayer is experiencing severe hardship in their view, including where the ratepayer may have previously entered into payment arrangements with the City and repeatedly defaulted, to meet an independent financial counsellor or counselling service who is a member of the Financial Counsellors' Association of Western Australia (FCAWA). The City will provide the ratepayer with a list of such services to allow them to choose the one they consider most appropriate to their requirements.
- f. Receive from the financial counsellor an assessment of the ratepayer's financial position and an income and expenditure statement as well as a recommendation to the City as to what the ratepayer can afford.
- g. Following review and liaison with the financial counsellor, to then work with the ratepayer to structure a suitable payment arrangement that accommodates the financial constraints advised by the financial counsellor.

2.4. Exceptional circumstances:

In cases where the ratepayer may be experiencing circumstances of a particularly difficult character, such as the recent death of an immediate family member, the City may decide to defer recovery action, including payment reminder notices, for a period of time.

2.5. Administration charges and rates penalty interest:

Depending on the particular circumstances, the City may offer to waive or write-off some or all payment arrangement administration charges and/or rates penalty interest accrued. If so determined, such write-offs will be undertaken in accordance with the Write-Off of Monies delegation stated in the City's Register of Delegation of Authority.

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