



# Hardship Policy

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## Hardship Policy Revision History

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## Policy Acceptance Sign-Off

The following business stakeholders have accepted this document:

Business Area	Authorising Officer		Sign-off
Customer Operations	Head of Customer Operations	Mr. Gino Fragapane	

# Hardship Policy

## 1. What is Staying Connected?

At AGL, we recognise that our customer's financial situation can change at any time, therefore in times of need, we have our *Staying Connected* program to assist our customers who are experiencing financial hardship to sustainably manage their energy bills and supply usage.

*Staying Connected* is AGL's national hardship program. Launched in early 2003, the program was developed in consultation with AGL's Customer Council, which includes consumer representatives from a range of organisations, such as St Vincent de Paul, The Smith Family, the South Australian Council of Social Services and Uniting Care, with training and support provided from Kildonan Child and Family Services.

While our national credit guidelines are sufficiently flexible to meet most our customers' needs, we acknowledge that, at times, customers may not be able to meet these guidelines. As such, we are committed to offering innovative and effective solutions to customers facing bill payment difficulties, therefore residential customers who display a willingness to pay, but are genuinely prevented from doing so due to either short-term or long-term difficulties may be eligible for AGL's *Staying Connected* program.

The *Staying Connected* program forms part of AGL's 'shared responsibility model', under this model, energy retailers, the government, community groups and customers should all share responsibility for assisting customers in financial hardship:

- > Customers should contact their energy retailer as soon as possible to inform them of any difficulty they are having paying their bill. Retailers, community groups and government agencies should all work with customers to encourage them to make this contact and discuss their circumstances openly;
- > Retailers should support customers in financial hardship through offering reasonable payment plans and, where appropriate, assisting customers through a dedicated hardship program;
- > Government should continue to assist customers in financial hardship through the provision of concessions and grant programs. Ultimately, where a customer has insufficient income for life's essentials, Government should provide appropriate income support; and
- > Community groups should assist in the identification of customers in financial hardship and provide information on, and assist customers access to, available support.

### 1.1 Policy Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to highlight the key features of the *Staying Connected* program and to provide a detailed outline of our end-to-end processes with respect to customer management.

### 1.2 Scope

This policy applies to all serviced states of the AGL Group of Companies (**AGL Group**), AGL and PowerDirect residential customers, with electricity and gas accounts.

## 2. Hardship

### 2.1 What is Hardship?

At AGL we define hardship as you're willing to pay your energy bills however you are in a temporary situation or prolonged situation which genuinely prevents you from doing so. These causes can include experiencing a temporary loss of primary income, family violence, separation, disability, serious illness, or death.

The *Staying Connected* program provides a holistic approach to understanding your situation, this includes providing flexible and tailored payment options which includes partnering with financial counsellors, and other support services to ensure you receive the right level of support relating to your circumstances.

We are passionate about helping our customers achieve a position of sustainability with regards to both their energy bills and their usage.

### 2.2 Types of Hardship

#### 2.2.1 Short-term Difficulties

AGL views short-term hardship as an unexpected change to your situation, which temporarily prevents you from paying your current bill. We can offer flexible payment arrangements to assist you through these periods, and help you get back on track.

#### 2.2.2 Long-term Difficulties

Long-term hardship is where unexpected and/or potentially prolonged challenging circumstances prevent you from paying your bills over an extended amount of time. We understand you require tailored payment arrangements and other forms of support to ensure you have every opportunity to get back on track.

### 2.3 Identifying customers experiencing hardship

AGL encourages you to proactively contact us if you are having trouble in meeting your financial commitments. We provide contact details on every letter we send you, so you can contact us and advise us if you are having difficulty in paying your bill.

If you are uncomfortable with discussing your financial situation with us, you can nominate a representative to contact us on your behalf. This can be someone you have a personal relationship with or any other representative such as a financial counsellor. Please note, you will need to advise AGL that you have nominated this person so we can discuss your account details with them.

Ways in which we identify customers experiencing hardship, include:

- > Family breakup;
- > Long term/ terminal illness;
- > Medical expenses;
- > Death in the family;
- > Serious accident requiring long term medical expenses;
- > Loss of primary income; and/or
- > How many times has a customer broken their payment arrangement.

## 3. How Staying Connected works

AGL is committed to ensuring if you meet the eligibility criteria that you're accepted onto the program in a quick and simple manner, thus providing the right support as early as possible and giving you every opportunity to get back on track.

### 3.1 The *Staying Connected* process

- > Potential hardship customers will be referred to a specialist team where a team member will assess your ability to pay;
- > You will be offered a payment plan which takes into consideration your capacity to pay;
- > We will recommend government grants, applicable concessions, as well as providing you with tips on managing your energy usage; and
- > AGL will send you a welcome letter confirming your entry onto the *Staying Connected* program which outlines our commitments and your responsibilities, your welcome letter will also contain a link to view AGL's hardship policy online, including a hardcopy summary of AGL's hardship policy.

### 3.2 Eligibility Criteria

- > A current AGL or PowerDirect residential customer;
- > Energy supply is for your primary residential address;
- > Agree to maintain engagement with us and comply with the program requirements as outlined in *section 4.2 Your Commitments*.

We also have a range of support measures available which include referral to our Community Partner agencies for financial counselling services, home energy audits and advice on Government grants or concessions where applicable. We encourage you to work openly and honestly with us to ensure we can provide the best available support. AGL understand that you may not meet all the above criteria however we will take a holistic approach in assessing your eligibility and admission onto the program.

### 3.3 Ineligibility Criteria

- > Business and farm customers are ineligible for the *Staying Connected* program; and/or
- > Employees of AGL are also ineligible to participate in the *Staying Connected* program unless a senior manager provides written approval.

## 4. Commitment

The AGL *Staying Connected* program is all about providing you with extra support when you need it. Partnering with you and sharing the responsibility is critical to ensure you have every opportunity to get back on track.

### 4.1 Our *Staying Connected* commitments

AGL will offer innovative and effective solutions when you face bill payment difficulties. AGL will ensure you receive:

- > Empathetic and Respectful interaction;
- > Fair and reasonable payment plans;
- > Consistent and transparent access to the AGL *Staying Connected* program;

- > Proactive information on the financial and non-financial support available;
- > Protection from disconnection when participating in the program;
- > Access to other financial support (which may include debt relief, payment incentives or payment matching);
- > Continued education and information on managing the cost of energy;
- > Access to energy saving products and programs where applicable;
- > When you provide, us consent, AGL will place you on the most appropriate AGL product to ensure your ongoing energy costs are minimised;
- > Confirmation that you've been accepted into our *Staying Connected* program; and
- > A welcome pack which will also contain a link to view AGL's hardship policy online, including a hardcopy summary of AGL's hardship policy.

AGL is committed to ensuring you receive the best possible support and is a voluntary signatory to the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) sustainable payment plans framework. You can read more about the framework at <https://www.aer.gov.au/consumers/my-energy-bill/experiencing-trouble-paying-your-energy-bills>

#### **4.2 *Staying Connected* customer commitments**

To ensure you continue to receive the support you require and have every opportunity to get back on track, you must:

- > Demonstrate a willingness to pay for your energy use;
- > Agree to participate in the program and adhere to the agreed payment arrangements;
- > Work with AGL to sustainably reduce your energy usage;
- > Be available for schedule reviews;
- > Inform us, if there is any change in your circumstances and respond to contact from AGL;
- > Be willing to provide us with further information as required to support your ongoing participation on the *Staying Connected* program;
- > Provide contact details and an alternative contact person if appropriate, and ensure these details are kept up to date;
- > Contact AGL immediately if you are unable to meet any of your commitments; and
- > Ensure you take appropriate steps not to accumulate further debt.

Should you not meet these commitments; this may result in your removal from the *Staying Connected* program. Other factors that we may consider when reviewing your participation in the program can include timely completion of paperwork relating to Government grants and participation with any other supplementary support as agreed with you. We have adopted a holistic approach when assessing your willingness to participate in the program.

#### **4.3 Contingent on a customer's circumstances**

AGL will regularly liaise with you and review your account to ensure that the plan is suitable for your needs and is being adhered to. Under our case management system, reviews will be triggered by:

- > Missed payments;
- > Variances in consumption;
- > If the account is in credit;
- > If the account is finalised;
- > A scheduled review;
- > As part of the program, we may encourage you undertake financial counselling; and
- > provide you with the option of undergoing an energy efficiency audit.

From time to time, it is necessary for AGL to discuss with you the possibility of increasing your regular payments in order to align payments more closely with your ongoing consumption and the reduction of debt, to work towards a sustainable position. These discussions are held with careful consideration to understand your capacity to pay. Our specialist team are well trained in communication skills, are respectful and empathic at all times, striving to support, engage and empower you.

#### **4.4 When customer commitments are not kept**

The *Staying Connected* program is designed to help you stay on track, this means we're focused on helping you manage your situation to achieve a sustainable outcome. To do this, we require you to adhere to your payment arrangements, or actively engage with AGL should your circumstances change.

If you fail to meet your payment plan agreements, or customer commitments, you may be removed from the AGL *Staying Connected* program.

Our specialist team will make attempts to phone you on all telephone numbers that you have provided, make attempts in the morning, afternoon, and evening on different days. We will also send you a series of letters - including a 'Please contact letter' and a 'Revoke warning letter'.

If authorised, a specialist team consultant will contact an alternative person such as a Financial Counsellor or other support person to engage on your behalf before a decision is made to remove you from the program. If you fail to respond to all our attempts to contact you, you will be removed from the program. A letter will be sent to you advising that the account will be removed from the program, credit and collection action will resume and you may face disconnection, and may also be charged additional fees by the collection agency.

## **5. Payment Plans**

AGL understands your situation may vary from time to time and is committed to offering solutions when you are experiencing payment difficulties. AGL will consult with you and/or your Financial Counsellor to determine an appropriate payment arrangement to help you manage your situation and prevent further debt. You will be responsible for committing and adhering to the amount and frequency of your payment arrangement and advise AGL of any changes to your circumstances which may impact you meeting your agreed obligations.

### **5.1 Type of Payment Arrangements**

#### **5.1.1 Flexible Arrangement**

Flexible payment arrangements are intended to support you when experiencing cash flow problems. These arrangements are offered to you when you are able to repay the amount owing prior to your next bill being issued.

#### **5.1.2 Short-term Arrangement**

Short-term payment arrangements are for when you have a temporary inability to pay your bill. This payment plan will allow you to carry the amount owing for up to six months, whilst continuing to pay your ongoing cost of energy.

#### **5.1.3 Extended Payment Arrangement**

Extended payment arrangements are a longer term structured arrangement to help you get back on track by reducing consumption and debt.



On review of your situation and eligibility for an extended payment arrangement, *Staying Connected* may take into consideration:

- > Your acceptance and completion of an appointment with an accredited Financial Counsellor; and/or
- > Participation in a home energy audit supplied at no charge by AGL.

## **5.2 Staying on Track**

Capacity to pay is a household's ability to meet their expenses within their current level of income while maintaining a basic standard of living. AGL recognises that energy is one of life's essential requirements, and a lack of access to energy due to an incapacity to pay, can lead to and/or exacerbate health problems and social exclusion. To ensure that you are meeting your payment arrangement obligations, when assessing a customer's capacity to pay as part of establishing a sustainable payment arrangement, we will discuss the following:

- > your current situation;
- > verifying if you are able to make a payment and how much you can afford to commit to;
- > your level of usage;
- > the total amount owing;
- > the amount you have advised you can afford to pay; and
- > other information you have advised regarding your capacity to pay.

If a Financial Counsellor calls on your behalf, our specialist team consultants consider their advice regarding your capacity to pay and also recognise that this shows willingness by yourself to pay the account.

Details of how the payment plan is reached are recorded in a notation on your account. The documentary evidence of our assessment is professional, clear and easily understood by a third party and in line with privacy guidelines.

The primary goal of the specialist team consultant is to work with you to align energy consumption with your capacity to pay. To work with you to achieve this, our specialist team consultants provide additional support by offering information on energy efficiency, Government concession entitlements and the availability of independent financial counselling services.

The fact that there is, generally, no time limit on the program enables the creation of affordable and realistic payment plans, which ultimately aim to align usage and affordability. However, while there is no time limit, you cannot remain on the program if you are not willing to actively participate and work with AGL to align your usage with your capacity to pay.

# 6. Extra Financial and Non-Financial Support

The AGL *Staying Connected* program aims to ensure you have been offered all available support, allowing you opportunities to improve your situation. Some types of support will be determined on a case-by-case basis, depending on information provided by you.

## **6.1 Centrepay and other payment methods**

Centrepay is a free voluntary bill paying service where deductions come from your Centrelink payments can be used to pay your energy bills. If you are receiving Centrelink benefits, we strongly recommend you setup scheduled payments through Centrepay. We encourage you to speak with us to ensure you understand more about how this service works.

If you are unable to use Centrepay, AGL also offers a number of other ways to make payments. Other payment methods AGL offer and which may meet your circumstances, include:

- > BPAY;
- > Direct debit.
- > Credit Card;
- > Post Billpay;
- > PayPal; and/or
- > Cheque or Money Order.

You can access our most up to date payment information on [www.agl.com.au](http://www.agl.com.au).

Please note, if you pay your energy bills using a credit card, or any card that uses a credit card payment facility, AGL is charged a merchant services fee by your financial institution. This will appear on your next bill as 'payment processing fee'. You can view the payment processing fee amount in your relevant state's Fee Schedule available on our website.

There are other methods for paying your energy bills with AGL that won't incur a payment processing fee, which you can learn about in the Billing and Payments section of Help and Support on the AGL website [www.agl.com.au](http://www.agl.com.au)

## **6.2 Government concession and rebates**

AGL is committed to ensuring that our customers on the *Staying Connected* program are getting all the financial support that they are entitled to, including Government energy bill assistance programs such as rebates or concessions for low income earners and customers with medical or life support needs.

As part of your customer commitments, we encourage you to apply and maintain your Government support entitlements to ensure you can continue to demonstrate you are doing all you can to minimise debt and offset consumption.

You may be eligible for the Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (WA), Energy Account Payment Assistance (NSW) or Utility Relief Grant Scheme(VIC) and the Home Energy Emergency Assistance Scheme(QLD). The following information can assist you to locate the appropriate assistance program within your state:

- > For Australian Capital Territory: [www.act.gov.au](http://www.act.gov.au)
- > For New South Wales: [www.resourcesandenergy.nsw.gov.au](http://www.resourcesandenergy.nsw.gov.au)
- > For South Australia: [www.sa.gov.au](http://www.sa.gov.au)
- > For Victoria: [www.dhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au)
- > For Queensland: [www.dews.qld.gov.au](http://www.dews.qld.gov.au)
- > For Western Australia: [www.concessions.wa.gov.au](http://www.concessions.wa.gov.au)

## **6.3 Payment incentives and Debt relief**

From time to time, AGL may offer unique assistance, such as payment incentives and debt relief. These initiatives will be offered at our discretion and we will use the following factors to assess eligibility:

- Capacity to pay;
- Payment history;
- Engagement; and
- Participation while on the program.

## **6.4 Financial Counselling Services**

We understand that there can be many factors contributing towards your payment difficulty, and that you may be faced with balancing competing financial commitments.

AGL believes that Financial Counsellors provide an important service in helping you work through these difficult financial situations, but they can also connect you with a broader support network.

In recognition of their valuable role, and to further support you in difficult times, AGL has partnered with a number of financial counselling organisations to increase financial counselling resources and support. With your approval, we will assess your situation and where appropriate refer you to an independent financial counselling service for additional support.

Alternatively, you can also access financial counsellors through the National Debt Helpline (1800 007 007) which provides free and independent financial advice which considers your entire financial situation.

As an AGL customer on the AGL *Staying Connected* program we may discuss with you the benefits of seeing a Financial Counsellor to help you get back on track sooner. If you decide to use a Financial Counsellor, AGL will also work with the Financial Counsellor, with the aim of providing the most suitable support for your unique set of circumstances.

### **6.5 Energy Contract Review**

AGL will also review your account every three months on the AGL *Staying Connected* program to ensure that you are on an energy plan that suits your situation. Where a plan is identified, which is more suitable and allows you to reduce your energy charges, AGL will proactively contact you and seek your explicit informed consent to move to the plan at no additional cost to you.

### **6.6 Fees and Charges**

Whilst you are on the AGL *Staying Connected* program, you will not be charged any late payment fees.

### **6.7 Energy auditing, retrofit program and appliance replacement**

In some circumstances, due to your financial situation, it may not be possible to immediately align your usage to a level that you can afford. We recognise that this may be exacerbated by poor quality housing stock and energy inefficient appliances which you cannot afford to repair or replace.

AGL will work with you to access other support services and entitlements where possible, including free financial counselling services and Government grants, such as Utility Relief Grants and Capital Grants.

#### **6.7.1 Energy efficiency advice**

We understand that ways to reduce your energy usage may not always be clear. Therefore, AGL will provide simple energy efficiency advice to you that may assist in reducing your energy use and future energy costs. This information may include telephone advice, written information, or referral to undergo a home energy audit upon receiving your permission.

#### **6.7.2 Home energy visits**

Generally, home energy audits will only be available to *Staying Connected* customers where energy usage and affordability cannot be aligned, either on a short term or a sustained basis.

We are of the view that the home energy audits, combined with the availability of energy efficient appliances and home improvements, will greatly assist customers experiencing hardship. Home energy visits can help through identifying inefficient appliances and usage behaviour.

Where we recommend a home energy visit from our independent home energy assessors, AGL will cover the cost of the visit.

If you agree to a home energy audit, it is our expectation that you will be available to participate in the audit at the agreed scheduled time. If for some reason, you are not able to meet at the agreed time, you must contact AGL as soon as possible to re-schedule the appointment. If you do not contact

us to re-schedule the appointment or you fail to participate in the audit and you do not contact us, we will re-evaluate your on-going participation in the *Staying Connected* program.

### **6.7.3 Retrofit and appliance replacement**

Customers on the *Staying Connected* program can swap their inefficient light globes and shower heads with energy efficient ones free of charge. AGL will also provide assistance upon advice received from our community partners in extreme circumstances to replace an inefficient appliance where it has been identified as causing you trouble in managing your energy usage.

## **7. Promoting Staying Connected**

*Staying Connected* has internal and external engagement strategies which are designed to promote awareness about the *Staying Connected* program amongst relevant groups – such as AGL front-line staff, Government departments and community organisations.

Information about the program is available on our website [www.agl.com.au](http://www.agl.com.au) outlining the benefits of the program that is available to external organisations and customers.

Further each bill contains a notice encouraging customers experiencing difficulties paying to contact AGL to discuss what support is available to them.

We recognise that customers in hardship are often not aware of their entitlements. Accordingly, these strategies support the promotion of awareness about the *Staying Connected* program for customers who may require additional assistance.

### **7.1 External networks to inform program and processes**

AGL actively engages and consults with consumer and community groups on its policies, processes, and product designs. AGL's Customer Council meets quarterly and includes representation from residential and small to medium business customers, covering all states within which AGL operates. Representation on the Council includes: Queensland Council of Social Services, Public Interest Advocacy Centre, SA Farmers Federation, SA Uniting Communities, Australian Industry Group and from Victoria includes St Vincent de Paul Society, Consumer Action Law Centre, and Kildonan Uniting Care. AGL also regularly participates in community group and financial counselling conferences and forums, acknowledging the importance of taking a shared responsibility approach to affordability issues.

## **8. Training**

AGL's front line staff receive comprehensive training in the application and adherence to this policy. A copy of AGL's Hardship Policy is made available to all frontline staff, including associated departments that handle hardship enquiries. All staff who carry out relevant functions in relation to this segment of customers have read and understood AGL's Hardship Policy.

## **9. Complaint Handling**

Customers being supported under the *Staying Connected* program continue to have the same rights in relation to their accounts as customers outside of the program.

If there are concerns or complaints, all customers have the right to refer that complaint through to the business.

Concerns can initially be raised directly with a member of AGL's team, AGL will attempt to resolve the complaint at the first point of contact.

If you believe that your complaint has not been resolved, you have the right to escalate your issue externally, and can also request support from the relevant state Ombudsman scheme for additional independent advice free of charge.

ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal	02 6207 1740	<a href="http://www.acat.act.gov.au">www.acat.act.gov.au</a>
Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW	1800 246 545	<a href="http://www.ewon.com.au">www.ewon.com.au</a>
Energy and Water Ombudsman South Australia	1800 665 565	<a href="http://www.eiosa.com.au">www.eiosa.com.au</a>
Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria	1800 500 509	<a href="http://www.ewov.com.au">www.ewov.com.au</a>
Energy and Water Ombudsman Queensland	1800 662 837	<a href="http://www.ewoq.com.au">www.ewoq.com.au</a>
Energy and Water Ombudsman Western Australia	08 9220 7588	<a href="http://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au">www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au</a>

## 10. Privacy

At AGL we take our customer's privacy and protecting their personal information seriously. We manage our customer's information in line with the *Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)* and the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs). Your financial information will only be accessed to assist you with your application.

## 11. Contact us

Please contact the below should you require any further information on:

Having trouble in paying your electricity and gas bill, please contact us on 131 835.



*Staying Connected* also has an interpreter service available for customers whose first language is a language other than English. Literature in relation to the *Staying Connected* program will be translated into other languages to improve accessibility for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. To access this service, please contact us on 1300 307 245.



A TTY service is available for customers who are hearing impaired. To access this service, please contact us on 133 677 quoting 1300 664 358.

