



## **Hardship Policy – Victorian Customers**

### **1. Purpose**

Electricity in a Box is committed to providing effective assistance to Victorian residential customers who are having trouble paying their gas and/or electricity bills on time. We have revised our Payment Assistance Policy for this purpose.

### **2. Policy statement**

Energy is an essential service that customers must be able to access for both economic and social inclusion. We aim to provide a socially responsible program that helps customers manage their energy costs while being economically sustainable for Electricity in a Box.

We understand that vulnerability is complex and varied, and that people need a range of options for assistance, depending on how long it may take them to become financially stable.

For customers who are currently experiencing or anticipating payment difficulty, we offer a range of services designed to help manage their energy usage and payments. This can include flexible payment arrangements (including payment deferrals), payment plans to provide certainty around energy bills, advice and tips on other support which is available, and where appropriate, customer case management.

### **3. Objectives**

The key objectives of this policy are:

- To help customers manage their energy usage in an affordable and sustainable way
- To support customers in closing the gap between energy usage and their financial situation, by providing energy efficiency advice and education
- To raise the importance of the energy bill as part of the customer's overall financial commitments
- To encourage self-help strategies based on a shared responsibility model
- To treat customers with empathy, respect and fairness
- To provide short, medium and longer term assistance to qualifying customers.

### **4. Getting assistance**

If you are a current Victorian Electricity in a Box residential account holder, this policy applies to you.

We know energy bills can make life difficult. We also understand that it can be uncomfortable to speak to someone when you're struggling with financial issues. But please, don't hesitate to get in touch with us – we promise to be discreet and respectful.

You only need to provide information you're comfortable sharing and where possible we make assistance available online so you can get help without having to speak to anyone. If you do speak to us directly, we'll talk with you about factors that may be contributing to your financial position, at a level you feel comfortable with. From this discussion, and based on your circumstances, we'll help you develop a sustainable payment solution. You're also able to authorise someone to call on your behalf.

The type of assistance you can receive varies depending on your circumstances, but at the very least, you'll receive the assistance that you are entitled to under the Victorian Energy Retail Code.

## **5. Your responsibilities**

This policy is based on a model of shared responsibility. We're happy to help you while you do what you can to try to manage your energy usage and payments. To ensure the help we provide under this policy is most effective it's important that you agree:

- to work with us to determine your ability to pay and develop a payment solution
- to pay the amounts set out in any agreed payment schedule in full and on time
- to tell us if there's any change in your circumstances that may impact your ability to make payments
- to keep us updated with your latest details
- to have meaningful discussions with us, as part of our review process
- to complete an energy audit of your premises, if requested
- to work with external agencies, if required
- to work with us to lower your energy costs and usage.

If the arrangements we agree no longer suit you, it's important that you let us know. If you stop making agreed repayments without contacting us about it, we may proceed towards debt collection and possibly disconnection. We will not cease to provide assistance as long as you continue to engage with us unless it becomes apparent that you are no longer facing payment difficulties

## **6. Types of assistance**

If you're up to date with your payments but could use some help staying on top of things, we have a range of options which could help. These include:

- Payments of a set amount over a specified time period
- Payments at different intervals
- Extension of the pay by date for a bill
- Payment for energy use in advance.

This type of assistance can be offered by all of our customer facing team members, so just call 1300 933 039 to discuss any of these options.

If you've missed a payment, we'll work with you to pay your debt.

Depending on the type of help you need, our assistance may include:

- Repayment of arrears over a period of up to two years, paying in regular intervals of up to one month.
- Advice on options that will enable you to repay your arrears within two years Specific advice on your likely future energy use/cost and how this could be lowered
- Advice on Government and non-Government assistance to help meet energy costs (including payment by Centrepay if applicable).

If you're unable to pay for the ongoing cost of your energy while you repay any amounts owing we can also provide:

- Practical assistance to help lower energy costs, including an initial period of at least 6 months during which:
  - repayment of arrears is put on hold, and
  - you can pay less than full cost of your ongoing energy use while you work on lowering that cost, and
  - other assistance which meets the objectives of this policy is provided.

During this time we'll also ensure that you're on the most appropriate tariff, provide assistance based on your pattern of energy use and give you information on how you're progressing towards lowering your energy costs.

We may also look at options for conducting energy audits via telephone or in your home and, where it will make a material reduction to your bills, discuss options to help replace inefficient appliances. These options may require you to contribute financially, but we'll factor this in when discussing your broader payment arrangements.

Depending on your circumstances, you may have to pay for your ongoing usage while receiving assistance of this nature, or you may be able to pay less than the full amount if that's what you can afford. In some circumstances we may be able to extend the assistance provided beyond the initial six-month period. Either way, after the initial six-month period and any extension, you are still entitled to the other assistance we can provide under this section.

If you miss a payment in the period where you're paying below the cost of your energy use, we'll contact you to discuss your options. If during this period you're having trouble implementing measures to reduce your costs we can discuss those too. It's important to note that the difference between what you pay and the actual cost of your usage will be added to your arrears.

We have experience in helping many different customers who've had trouble paying their bills, so we'll offer you the payment arrangement we think will be most helpful to you. If this is not the case, or you miss a payment, you can propose an alternative which we'll accept if it:

- includes paying equal amounts at regular intervals of up to one month
- will result in your arrears being fully paid within 2 years after the first payment
- includes payments for both ongoing energy use and arrears, and
- is based on a reasonable forecast of your energy use.

To ensure you're clear about your obligations, we'll send you a written schedule of payments which reflect the arrangement we have agreed to.

## **7. Communicating with you**

Financial vulnerability can occur for any number of reasons. We do what we can to look out for issues and if we notice anything that indicates you may be having difficulty paying your bills, you'll probably hear from us. We'll try to ensure that information, advice or links we provide on reminder notices or other communications are relevant, however we don't know your circumstances so please don't be offended if we have made incorrect assumptions. The best way to let us know how to help you is to speak to us.

As a minimum, we will contact you within 21 days of a bill falling overdue (where the outstanding amount is greater than \$55) to see if we can help. You'll have at least 6 days to respond to work out what sort of assistance is right for you. We'll also be in touch if you miss a payment under an agreed payment arrangement and will provide an opportunity to get back on track or establish an alternative arrangement.

We'll continue to work with you as long as you continue to work with us. This means doing what is reasonable to comply with the terms of any arrangements we've agreed to and working with us to vary your arrangements if you're unable to make a payment. If you no longer need our help, you may wish to end any arrangements we have made.

## **8. Complaints management**

We manage customer complaints in accordance with *Guidelines for complaints handling in organisations*. Our goal is to resolve customer complaints at the first point of contact between our customer and our team. However, if this hasn't been achieved, customers can escalate their concerns to our internal dispute resolution team via email: [info@electricityinabox.com](mailto:info@electricityinabox.com)

The relevant external complaint handling body in Victoria is the Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria, which can be contacted via:

Mail: Reply Paid 469, Melbourne VIC 8060  
Phone: 1800 500 509  
Fax: 1800 500 549  
Email: [ewovinfo@ewov.com.au](mailto:ewovinfo@ewov.com.au)  
Web: [www.ewov.com.au](http://www.ewov.com.au)

## **9. Contact Electricity in a Box**

We're here to help. If you'd like more information about how we can help you with payment difficulties, please call us on 1300 933 039 or email [info@electricityinbox.com](mailto:info@electricityinbox.com). You can find a copy of this policy at <https://electricityinbox.com.au/>.

## **10. Privacy**

Electricity in a Box is committed to protecting the personal information of our customers in accordance with the Privacy Act (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles. Our Privacy Policy can be accessed at <https://electricityinbox.com.au/>.

## **11. Governance**

This policy has been developed to support customers experiencing financial challenges in accordance with relevant obligations that apply to Electricity in a Box. The Energy Retail Code, which sets out retailers' obligations and minimum customer entitlements, takes precedence over this hardship policy in all circumstances.

Electricity in a Box's Payment Assistance policy is subject to periodic review to ensure currency, completeness and compliance with relevant regulatory requirements.

## **12. Continuous improvement / performance audits**

Electricity in a Box monitors and reviews its operational performance to ensure it provides the services outlined in this policy. We are subject to audits from the Essential Services Commission of Victoria as a condition of our Retail Electricity Licence.

Being connected to the community through our understanding of our customers and their needs is vital. This enables our support programs to be meaningful, successful and relevant.