

COVID-19 Financial Hardship Policy



Document Type:	Council Policy	TRIM reference:	DOC/22/11775
Document Status:	Approved by Council		
Policy Owner (position):	Executive Manager Corporate Services		
Internal endorsement required:	Not Applicable		
Final Approval by:	Council		
Date approved:	17/05/2022		
Evidence of approval:	Council – Refer to Notes in TRIM		
Version Number:	4	Frequency of Review:	6 months
Review Date:	31/12/2022		
Date rescinded:	Click here to enter a date. OR <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not applicable		
Related legislation:	Local Government Act 2020		
Related strategic documents, policies, or procedures:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial Hardship Policy Revenue and Debt Collection Policy 		

Date	Version Number	Details of Version	Modified by
16/06/2020	1 DOC/20/12876	Adopted by Council	Executive Manager Corporate Services
16/02/2021	2 DOC/20/47771	Extension of time to 15 June 2021	Executive Manager Corporate Services
30/03/2022	3 DOC/21/23297	Extension of time to 30 June 2022	Executive Manager Corporate Services
8/4/2022	4 DOC/22/11775	Extension of time	Executive Manager Corporate Services

1. Purpose

This Policy establishes Mount Alexander Shire Council's position in relation to support for ratepayers, businesses, and residents experiencing temporary financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Scope

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a highly infectious virus that spreads through close contact with an infected person. The World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic on 30 January 2020 and the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency on 16 March 2020. Since that date, the State Government has imposed, and removed, a wide range of restrictions in an attempt to mitigate the impacts of the virus. In responding to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the Shire, Council is committed to assisting residents, ratepayers, and businesses who are experiencing financial hardship.

Financial hardship is a circumstance of experiencing a lack of financial means, which may be either temporary or ongoing. Persons experiencing financial difficulty on a personal level may wish to obtain advice from a community financial counsellor by calling 1800 007 007 (Monday to Friday, 9.30 am – 4.30 pm). Alternatively, the National Debt Helpline contains information that is accessible at www.ndh.org.au.

Council's ongoing Financial Hardship Policy only assists ratepayers with their primary residential property. The COVID-19 Financial Hardship Policy, however, will apply more broadly to the following circumstances.

- Property rates and charges - all property types are eligible for assistance, regardless of their rateable or leviable status.
- Non-property rates and charges - a number of specific relief measures are available for certain businesses, individuals, or organisations.

3. Policy

Council is committed to providing temporary relief for ratepayers, businesses, and residents who have identified they are experiencing financial hardship because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Council aims to provide assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic with the intention of minimising any additional financial stress.

3.1. Forms of assistance available – property rates and charges

Payment arrangements

Council encourages ratepayers experiencing financial hardship to set up a payment plan specifically tailored to their needs. This is to minimise any further hardship and financial stress, and to reduce the amount of debt owing after the pandemic.

Payment deferral

If the ratepayer is unable to enter into a payment plan immediately, they may defer payment of their rates until 31 December 2022.

Council will continue to issue Rate Notices while a deferment is in place.

Interest hold

For those ratepayers who have identified they are experiencing COVID-19 related financial hardship, and who have entered into a payment arrangement or rates deferral, Council will waive interest charges that accumulate from 30 June 2022 to 31 December 2022.

Debt recovery

While this policy is applicable, Council will not undertake collection action for those ratepayers who have sought relief under this policy, and who adhere to their agreement with Council.

Ratepayers are encouraged to contact Council to discuss their rates; however, Council reserves the right to initiate the debt collection process. In this instance, the ratepayer will be liable for all legal costs that Council may incur in the debt collection process.

3.2 Forms of assistance available – non-property rates and charges

Permits

Where a business can demonstrate financial hardship because of COVID-19, such as restrictions on trading or receipt of the JobKeeper subsidy (or its equivalent), flexible arrangements are available in relation to current year permits.

There is a wide range of scenarios applicable for individuals, businesses and organisations who hold permits. Permit holders are encouraged to contact Council staff to discuss how we may be able to assist. Council may provide support for 2022/2023 permit fees payable.

Lease of Council commercial premises

The *COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Bill 2020* came into effect on 25 April 2020 for a period of six months, and the *COVID-19 Commercial and Residential Tenancies Legislation Amendment (Extension) Act 2020* saw this extended to 31 December 2020. In the absence of any replacement legislation that may arise, assistance to lessees will be subject to consideration of the lessee's circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

Waste charges

Special arrangements exist for those cultural and recreational properties who pay a waste charge and who receive a 100% concession on property rates. Council will consider waiving waste charges on a pro-rata basis for the 2022/2023 financial year where restrictions are introduced that impact these properties.

4. Definitions of Abbreviations Used

A table of terms and their definitions as they relate to the policy:

Term	Definition
Council	Mount Alexander Shire Council
Debt	An amount of money owed, including an alleged debt
Deferment	The postponement of payment in whole or part for a specified period
Payment Arrangement	Spreading the outstanding monies owed over an agreed period, allowing for additional time to make the payment without any legal action being taken
Primary Residential Property	The principal place of residence of a ratepayer within the Shire

5. Human Rights Statement

Human Rights Statement

It is considered that this policy does not impact negatively on any rights identified in the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2006).