

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE POLICY

1. Purpose

South East Water condemns the perpetration of domestic and family violence in all its forms and recognises the correlation between domestic and family violence, financial abuse and access to essential services. South East Water is committed to supporting customers impacted by domestic and family violence and contributing to Victoria's response to domestic and family violence.

We recognise the important responsibility we have in working together with government, corporate and the community sector to support those affected by domestic and family violence to improve outcomes for customers and the community.

South East Water's Domestic and Family Violence policy outlines our approach to supporting customers experiencing domestic and family violence. Recognising the many barriers to disclosure, we take people at their word and commit to providing support and protections for those experiencing domestic and family violence, regardless of whether they have disclosed their circumstances to us.

We seek to create a safe and supportive environment by treating our customers unique situations with respect, empathy and sensitivity. In line with our *Safety First* mindset, customer safety and wellbeing will always be our focus.

2. Scope of Policy

This policy applies to all South East Water customers experiencing or affected by domestic and family violence.

3. Our Commitment

To support customers experiencing domestic and family violence, we're committed to:

- Ensuring customers are aware of and can easily access support through South East Water.
- Protecting the privacy, safety and confidentiality of customer information.
- Providing sensitive and tailored support in consultation with our customers to achieve positive outcomes.
- Empowering customers, with our support to manage the financial impacts associated with domestic and family violence.
- Connecting customers with expert support via referral services.
- Increasing awareness of domestic and family violence and the impacts on customers and our community.
- Continuing to build internal capability through effective and ongoing specialist training and ensuring our team have the skill and knowledge to support customers.

The Domestic and Family Violence policy is available to any customer on request. If a customer requests a copy in a different language, we will do our best to accommodate that request.

4. Definitions

Family violence is defined under the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic) as:

- (a) behaviour by a person towards a family member of that person if that behaviour:
 - (i) is physically or sexually abusive; or
 - (ii) is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or
 - (iii) is economically abusive; or
 - (iv) is threatening; or
 - (v) is coercive; or
 - (vi) in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person; or
- (b) behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear or witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of, behaviour referred to in paragraph (a).

5. Customer Support

5.1 Accessing support at South East Water

South East Water has a specialist Customer Care team dedicated to supporting customers experiencing domestic and family violence, vulnerability and hardship. Our trained employees work with customers to tailor support options that best meet their unique circumstances.

We appreciate that when experiencing domestic and family violence, having to retell your story can be difficult and traumatic. The complexity of domestic and family violence situations also means that it may not always be safe to disclose this information.

Direct line – Customer Care

In respect of these challenges, customers experiencing domestic and family violence can contact our Customer Care team directly on **03 9552 3540**.

Case Manager

Where possible, a Case Manager from our Customer Care team will be assigned to your account, meaning that wherever possible you will speak with the same employee who understands your situation and so you don't have to re-tell your story.

5.2 Protecting your privacy, safety and confidentiality

We understand that customers experiencing domestic and family violence are entrusting South East Water with sensitive information and expect that all steps will be taken to protect your privacy, safety and confidentiality.

We acknowledge the importance of customers having confidence that information they share with South East Water about their situation is not disclosed to perpetrators.

South East Water have put in place additional measures to meet these objectives.

Immediate safety support

If there is an immediate safety risk or concern for customers or their children, we will contact local police or call triple zero (000) for assistance.

Application of a safety flag

Once your account is transitioned to the Customer Care team, a flag can be applied alerting our teams that all enquiries which relate to your account are to be transferred through to our Customer Care team.

The flag will also disable access to your account via the South East Water portal to prevent perpetrators, particularly in the case of joint accounts from accessing information. Any requests for information related to your account will also be directed to our Customer Care team who are trained to effectively manage perpetrator interactions and protect the privacy, safety and confidentiality of customers experiencing domestic and family violence.

Additional identification checks

We understand that for joint accounts, perpetrators can have access to personal information that allows them to pass routine verification and identification checks. With this in mind, our additional identification check process can be activated on your account to ensure your information and safety is protected. Additional identification checks may include a password.

Billing

South East Water understands that customers may have preferences about how they receive bills due to the personal information contained with them. If you need to change your billing preferences contact our Customer Care team directly on 03 9552 3540 (Monday to Friday 8 am – 6 pm) for a confidential chat or email customercare@sew.com.au. Further information can be found in [South East Water's Customer Charter](#).

5.3 Sensitive and tailored support options

South East Water recognises the complex nature of domestic and family violence situations. This means that customers may benefit from a variety of support options. Our Customer Care team will work with you to understand your needs and tailor a support plan that best meets your individual circumstances.

Whilst our Customer Care team is unable to provide professional counselling support, they can:

- Actively **listen** with empathy and without judgement
- **Acknowledge** your disclosure and check that you are not in immediate harm
- Apply **extra account protections** to further protect your privacy, safety and confidentiality
- Assist by working with you to develop a **suitable support plan**
- Refer you to other **external support agencies** for further assistance.

5.4 Debt management

Domestic and family violence can include financial abuse with perpetrators often avoiding responsibility for debt and leaving their current or former partners with significant financial liabilities. This is especially problematic for debts attached to accounts held jointly with the perpetrator.

If you identify that you are affected by domestic and family violence, we will immediately pause debt collection activity on your account (including no additional debt collection costs or interest) and will ensure that your water supply is not restricted because of the debt.

Our Customer Care team will work with you to understand your needs and tailor an approach to managing your debt that takes into account your circumstances and capacity to pay. Debt assistance options may include:

- Affordable and flexible **payment plans**
- **More time to pay** payment arrangements
- Facilitating access to **government grants and assistance programs** (like the Utility Relief Grant Scheme) through referrals and application assistance
- Referrals to external support services including **financial counselling**
- **Debt relief.**

Debt relief

Additional support options are available for customers experiencing domestic and family violence to manage debt owed to South East Water. For customers affected by domestic and family violence, South East Water may waive or suspend all or part of your debt based on a number of factors, including:

- The amount of the debt
- The circumstances in which the debt was incurred (including if it was incurred as a result of financial abuse)
- Whether the debt should have been raised
- What payment assistance options have been (or could be) effective
- The customer's personal circumstances and capacity to pay the debt.

If your circumstances change, our Customer Care team will work with you to ensure that the debt assistance applied to your account adapts accordingly.

Joint accounts

We understand that customers on joint accounts may face additional barriers to accessing debt assistance, particularly where the other person on the account is a perpetrator. This may include not having access to financial information, being unaware of a debt and being apprehensive about the prospect of coming into contact with the perpetrator.

To remove these barriers and ensure that customers on joint accounts are able to conveniently access the same debt assistance pathways as other customers affected by domestic and family violence our Customer Care team will:

- Take steps to ensure your confidentiality is protected from other persons on the account, such as keeping details of calls with South East Water confidential, and not disclosing the personal information of one joint customer to another.
- Ensure that you can access support without having any contact with the perpetrator
- Take the same tailored approach to managing joint debts as it does for individual accounts.

Even if only one account holder is affected by domestic and family violence, we will immediately pause all debt collection activity on joint accounts (including no additional debt collection costs or interest) and will ensure that your water supply is not restricted because of the debt.

5.5 Payment Support

We recognise that family violence can cause payment difficulties. If you are affected by domestic and family violence you are eligible for payment support under South East Water's Customer Support policy. This policy describes the full range of payment assistance options available to customers experiencing payment difficulty.

Our Customer Care team will work with you to set up an approach to managing payments that suits your circumstances and your capacity to pay. The following payment support options are available to customers affected by domestic and family violence:

- Ensuring you receive any concession discounts you're entitled to
- Setting up affordable and flexible payment plan you can manage
- Helping you apply for any government grants you may be entitled to like the Utility Relief Grant
- Providing our own payment matching, grants and other financial incentives
- Offering plumbing support
- Providing advice on how to save water and reduce the cost of your bills
- Recommending financial counsellors and community services support where needed
- Checking in with you regularly to see if the support we're providing is right
- We may provide you with a digital meter to assist you in managing your water consumption.

6. Awareness and training

At South East Water we recognise that creating awareness and building capability within the organisation is the foundation to supporting customers experiencing domestic and family violence.

Our employees are provided with training to build awareness and understanding of issues relating to domestic and family violence, including the different types of domestic and family violence, barriers to disclosure, learning from those with lived experience and identifying indicators of people who may be experiencing domestic and family violence.

Ongoing training is provided to relevant employees to support the continued application of this policy and related policies and procedures in relation to customers experiencing domestic and family violence.

Relevant customer facing teams are provided with additional specialist training to assist with effectively handling customer disclosures and providing support with empathy and handling perpetrator interactions. Specific technical training related to South East Water's processes ensures we continue to build knowledge and capability across our customer facing teams to best support our customers.

South East Water recognises that our employees may also be impacted by or experiencing domestic and family violence. Supporting the wellbeing of our employees is our priority so where attendance at training is not an option due to an employees' circumstances, South East Water will work with the employee to explore alternate ways to ensure they have a comprehensive understanding of our domestic and family violence obligations.

7. Expert Support Services

South East Water is committed to connecting customers experiencing domestic and family violence with specialist family violence services who can provide expert support and advice. We acknowledge the complex nature of domestic and family violence situations and are able to provide a range of referral pathways to help you access the assistance you require.

Customers can access the following external support networks and resources:

- [1800Respect](#)

- [Safe Steps](#)
- [Djirra](#)
- [Intouch](#)
- [QLife](#)
- [Senior Rights Victoria](#)
- [Sexual Assault Crisis Line](#)
- [Men's Referral service](#)
- [With Respect Victoria](#)
- [WAYYS](#)
- [Family Violence Law Help](#)
- [Beyond Blue](#)
- [Kids Help Line](#)
- [Lifeline](#)
- [Orange Door](#)
- [Financial Counselling Victoria](#)
- [Uniting Vic. Tas](#)

8. Continuous improvement

This policy and its associated programs will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure these adequately meet and reflect the changing needs of our customers.

This approach is to ensure our support remains flexible and can adjust to meet the needs of the community. Recognising that customers may need a variety of support and information, South East Water is committed to diversifying its approach on a continuous basis.

In this respect, we'll work closely with peak bodies and customer committees to develop appropriate, customer focused support for customers experiencing family violence.

9. Related Policies

BS 2485 South East Water Customer Charter
BS 2144 South East Water Customer Support Policy
BS1055 South East Water Privacy Charter
BS 2450 Safety and Wellbeing Policy

10. Legislative Compliance

Water Industry Standard – Urban Customer Service 2024
Water Industry Act 1994 (Vic)
Water Act 1989 (Vic)
Privacy & Data Protection Act 2014 (Vic)
Health Records Act 2001 (Vic)
Gender Equality Act 2018 (Vic)
Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)

11. Approval

Approved by:	Executive Management Team
Approved on:	27/03/2024
Accountability for Implementation	General Manager, Customer Experience
Implementation:	General Manager Customer Experience
Sponsors:	General Manager, Customer Experience
Reviewed:	This policy and its associated procedures will be reviewed at least annually, or more frequently as required.