



Most vulnerable citizens denied hardship

A VICTORIAN OMBUDSMAN INVESTIGATION

Councils need to show greater empathy to their most vulnerable citizens, Financial Councillors Victoria Executive Officer Dr Sandy Ross urged.

His call comes after the Victorian Ombudsman tabled a report in Parliament into financial hardship, on May 17, 2021, which cited inconsistencies in how Victoria's 79 councils were assessing and granting financial hardship for ratepayers.

Dr Ross' key suggestions to ease the burden on ratepayers in hardship were:

- Have policies that are easy to understand;
- Reflect family violence in hardship policies and adequately support victims;
- Make appropriate referrals to financial councillors, rather than seeing it as a means to shift their responsibility;
- Have appropriate staffing to respond to ratepayers in difficulty
- For those in hardship to seek support from a financial counsellor

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Dr Ross praised the Victorian Ombudsman for its work into the issue.

"We did see some terrible cases of councils failing to adequately support victims of family violence in terrible situations," Dr Ross said.

"I think it's really important for any council or even creditors to listen to the stories of people they have a duty of caring towards.

"Anything short of a strong, supportive response can be really damaging in those circumstances."

Dr Ross said central to the failings of many councils was to adequately assess hardship and show a lack of empathy.

"They may have had hardship policies, but they were inaccessible; they were a mystery," he said.

"We've seen this problem in other industry sectors; if you don't say the magic word 'hardship' than no one even tells you what assistance they can provide."

Dr Ross said urged ratepayers having issues with their rates to get in contact.

"The Ombudsman points to numerous councils that do the right thing and our members love councils that support members of their community.

"But at the other end of the spectrum, you have councils that have really poor practices, where they almost assumed anybody who was in hardship was trying to do the council over.

"Financial councillors are free, they have to work without conflict and they're experts in assisting people negotiate with the organisations they owe money to and help get people's financial situation back on track."



Dr. Sandy Ross of Financial Councillors Victoria

