

Retail Water Customer Account Assistance & Debt Write-off Information Report

Responsible Officer: Group Manager Organisational Services (Helen McNeil)

Recommendation

That Council receive and note the following two information summaries approved in the six-month period July to December 2024:-

1. Retail Water Customer Account Assistance in the sum of \$7,704.12 listed in Table 1
2. Debt write-off in the sum of \$4,195.64 listed in Table 2.

Background

1. Retail Water Customer Account Assistance

Seven applications for financial assistance, in accordance with section 356 (1) and 582 (1) *Local Government Act 1993* (LG Act) and Council's 'Retail Water Customer Account Assistance' policy, were received in the six-month period July to December 2024. Details of the applications are set out below:

Table 1

Section 356 (Non pensioner)

Account	Date application received	Nature of leak	Original water charges due	S356 financial assistance to be approved	Adjusted water charges due after approval
11007-10000-8	8-Jul-24	The customer identified an underground leak caused by a split pipe located among bamboo in their paddock.	\$2,236.36	\$499.32	\$1,737.04
12048-10000-7	24-Aug-24	The customer discovered an underground leak resulting from a burst pipe at a joint near a creek bed.	\$3,700.80	\$1,596.00	\$2,104.80
12122-10000-6	11-Sep-24	The customer found a concealed leak underground, attributed to a split at the connection to the garden hose.	\$2,673.92	\$839.04	\$1,834.88
10544-11000-9	12-Sep-24	The customer experienced a leak underground at the poly pipe joint connecting the meter to the house.	\$4,650.38	\$2,307.36	\$2,343.02

11577-10000-8	18-Sep-24	The customer identified a leak due to an underground pipe burst, potentially caused by tree root growth or ground/rock movement.	\$2,441.69	\$652.08	\$1,789.61
12268-10000-1	14-Oct-24	The customer located a leak near the meter underground. A stopper has been installed at the point where the water was leaking.	\$3,673.99	\$1,575.48	\$2,098.51
10060-11000-3	1-Oct-24	The customer found a leak in the backyard, caused by a burst in the underground 25mm polyline.	\$1,865.57	\$234.84	\$1,630.73
		Total approved	\$21,242.71	\$7,704.12	\$13,538.59

2. Debt Write-Off

Council's 'Debt Management and Financial Hardship' policy provides that an information summary report be submitted to Council on a bi-annual basis.

As per Council Resolution [50/22]:

- All debts above \$5,000.00 (ex-GST) may be written off only by resolution of Council.
- Council has delegated to the General Manager the power to write-off debts equal to or below the \$5,000.00 threshold.

The General Manager has delegated authority for the write-off of debts equal to or below:

- \$ 1,000.00 to the Group Manager Organisational Services and the Finance Manager.
- Debts written off equal to or below \$ 5,000

Debts approved for write-off by Council staff were done so under delegation and in accordance with clauses 131 or 213 of the Local Government (General) Regulation 2021.

Debts approved for write-off during the period 1 July 2024 to 31 December 2024 are tabled below:

Table 2

Customer type	Ref. number	Write-off amount	Background	Reason	Approved by
Retail water account	12090	\$74.02	A leak was detected following the installation of the smart meter due to a faulty connection between the poly and copper pipe. The rupture caused a water leak. For the billing period from 06/04/24 to 30/04/24, the usage was estimated based on average daily consumption from the same quarter the previous year, with a recommendation to write off the difference in the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	10619	\$212.80	The customer identified a leak and a water operator found the path tap to be faulty. Historical usage data indicated minimal water usage, with the customer mostly using water to fill a 1kL IBC tank. The faulty path tap is considered an infrastructure issue, and staff recommended to write off \$212.80 for the 70kL of water usage.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	10563	\$647.52	A leak was identified at the connection between the service line and the poly pipe after the smart meter installation due to an insufficiently tightened fitting. Usage for the period of 03/05/2024 to 20/06/2024 was estimated based on average daily usage prior to installation, with a recommendation to write off the difference in the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	11480	\$6.08	A small leak was detected due to an old poly fitting, amounting to 2kL over 27 days. The leak was repaired, and the customer was recommended to receive a credit adjustment for 2 kL.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	11990	\$246.24	A leak was detected due to a malfunctioning gate valve, which the customer was unable to fully close. Historical data shows that the customer uses minimal water, with only 8kL used for the entire previous year. This gate valve failure was considered an infrastructure issue, and a write-off of \$246.24 for the 81kL of water usage was recommended.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM

Retail water account	11827	\$176.32	The customer found a leak at the meter after installation, which was due to the tap being left on. The old tap's non-standard ball valve made it difficult to determine whether it was fully closed. The leak resulted in a water loss of 58kL, and the contractor did not turn off the tap as per standard procedure. A credit adjustment was recommended for 58 kL (\$176.32).	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	10165	\$296.26	A system error led to a miscalculation of the customer's water usage and facility charge. Instead of billing for the correct period (15/06/24 - 22/06/24), the system erroneously calculated charges for 05/03/24 - 22/06/24, resulting in double billing. The overcharge was recommended to be credited.	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	10806	\$91.20	During the last meter reading cycle, the read showed a lower reading than the previous quarter, leading to an overcharge of 30kL (\$91.20). This error was due to the incorrect recording on the meter reading sheet.	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	11301	\$3.04	During the last meter reading cycle, the final meter read showed a lower reading than the previous quarter. The error resulted in overcharging of 1kL (\$3.04). Credit adjustment of \$3.04 was recommended for the discrepancy.	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	11184	\$3.04	When this meter was replaced with a smart meter, the final read photo showed that the reading (2323) which was less than last quarter's reading (2324). The error was found on the meter reading sheet recording for the May 24 reading cycle. Staff recommended to credit the overcharge of 1 kL (\$3.04).	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	11162	\$24.32	A pipe burst occurred, and the customer could not turn off the water as no handle was installed on the tap. The water operator replaced the tap immediately. Average daily usage prior to the smart meter installation was recommended to estimate usage for this period, with a recommendation to write off the difference in the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM

Retail water account	10865	\$3.04	When the meter was replaced with a smart meter, the final reading photo indicated a reading of 651, which was lower than the previous quarter's reading of 652. There was an error on the meter reading sheet for the February 2024 cycle, where the reading was incorrectly recorded as 652. Staff recommended to credit the overcharge of 1 kL (\$3.04).	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	11367	\$200.64	During the replacement of the meter with a smart meter, the final reading photo showed a reading of 820, which was lower than the previous quarter's reading of 896. It was identified that the reading for the May 2024 cycle was inaccurate. The customer was overcharged by 66 kL (\$200.64). Staff recommended to credit the overcharge	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	11159	\$18.24	A leak was identified at the meter frame after the installation of the smart meter. Usage data confirmed the customer was away from 04/07/24 to 22/07/24, with the leak stopping after repairs on 12/07/24. Staff recommended to write off 6kL of usage during this period.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	12105	\$279.68	A small leak was found following the installation of the smart meter. Rous had repaired the leaks on both sides of the meter. The usage for the period of 09/05/2024 to 19/08/2024 was estimated based on average daily consumption from the same quarter the previous year, with a recommendation to write off the difference in the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	10283	\$6.08	This customer has been charged incorrectly due to an error in our billing system. Their usage was only 1 kL but they were charged for 3 kL. Staff recommended to write off the 2 kL(\$6.08).	Error in assessment	FM
Retail water account	10282	\$6.08	The customer was incorrectly billed due to a system error. Although their usage was only 1 kL, they were charged for 3 kL. Staff recommended writing off the additional charge of 2kL (\$6.08).	Error in assessment	FM

Retail water account	11593	\$109.44	A leak occurred following the installation of the smart meter on 12/07/2024 and was subsequently repaired by Rous staff on 04/09/2024. To estimate the actual usage for the period from 12/07/2024 to 03/09/2024, staff used the average daily usage of the previous period and recommended writing off the difference between the estimated usage and the billed usage.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	10256	\$97.28	A leak was found at the fitting joining the customer's pipe to the meter following the smart meter installation. The leak was repaired on 19/07/24. Usage prior to the installation was used to estimate charges, and a write-off was recommended for the difference between the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	10633	\$3.04	A small leak was found at the T-pee fitting after the installation of the smart meter. The leak was minor, and Rous staff repaired it. This was on customer's side, and technically a customer issue, but Rous repaired it as a gesture of goodwill. The leak was deemed minor, and 1kL was considered sufficient to cover the leak.	Attempt to recover debt not cost effective	FM
Retail water account	10816	\$72.96	The customer has located a leak from the time that the smart meter was installed on 07/06/2024. The leak was located at the connection fitting. The usage for the period of 07/06/2024 to 03/09/2024 was estimated based on the average daily usage prior to installation, with a recommendation to write off the difference between the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	11223	\$145.92	A leak resulting from the installation of the smart meter on 07/09/2024 was found. The Temetra usage indicated that there was constant usage since the installation of smart meter since 12/07/2024. Usage for the period of 12/07/2024 to 03/09/2024 was estimated based on the average daily usage prior to installation, with a recommendation to write off the difference in the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM

Retail water account	10746	\$85.12	The customer reported a leak due to a failure associated with the smart meter installation on 11/07/2024. The leak was repaired on 26/07/2024. The usage was estimated using their average daily usage prior to the smart meter installation, with a recommendation to write off the difference between the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	12149	\$88.00	The customer was charged for the manual read fee; however, as they were not opposed to the smart meter, just the backflow device Rous' Staff recommended reversing this charge.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	12097	\$27.36	This customer had a leak due to the smart meter installation in May 2024 and their meter was turned off since that date. 9 kL had been recorded from 16/07/2024 to 05/08/2024. A water operator has been on site and checked that the tap has been turned off on both Rous' side and the customer's side. The read has not changed since the last read on 03/09/2024. Taking into consideration that the customer already had a smart meter installation issue prior, and this was 9 kL (\$27.36), it was not cost effective to continue to resolve this matter and pursue this charge. Staff recommended writing off the charge of \$ 27.36	Attempt to recover debt not cost effective	FM
Retail water account	11105	\$88.24	This customer had a leak due to a failure associated with the installation of the smart meter twice. Rous staff attended the site and replaced the b press elbow on 21/10/2024. Staff recommended using the average daily usage before the smart meter installation to estimate their bill for this period 22/05/2024 to 21/10/2024 and write off the difference between the estimated and billed amount.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM

Retail water account	11809	\$9.12	The customer reported a 3 kL water usage that cannot be explained. Historically, the customer has no usage. The data in Temetra was reviewed and found no anomalies. Despite multiple attempts to contact the customer for further information, no additional useful details were obtained. Given the amount of 3kL was so small (\$9.12), it was determined that further investigation would not be cost-effective. The Smart Meter Project Manager has advised the customer to lock the meter on their side to prevent theft. Staff recommended writing off the 3kL (\$9.12).	Attempt to recover debt not cost effective	FM
Retail water account	11391	\$164.00	A leak was discovered after the installation of the smart meter, originating from both the customer's and Rous' side at the meter fitting. Rous repaired both leaks on 2/12/2024. Staff recommended using the customer's average daily usage from the previous supply period to estimate the bill for the affected period, with the difference between the estimated and billed amount to be written off.	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM
Retail water account	11743	\$273.60	For the supply period from 03/09/2024 to 13/09/2024, the customer was billed at a rate of \$3.28 per kL. However, the correct rate should have been \$3.04, as the usage of 1,140 kL should have been billed on 05/09/2024, which falls under the previous year's pricing of \$3.04 per kL. This discrepancy arose due to a data connectivity issue during the Q1 billing period, which prevented usage from being recorded. Staff recommended the pricing difference to be written off.	Debt raised in error	FM
Retail water account	12139	\$436.00	In May 2024, a poly fitting at the meter was damaged and caused a leak when the smart meter was installed. Temetra usage data indicated continuous usage during night time hours, when minimal consumption was typically expected. Staff recommended using the average daily usage prior to the installation of the smart meter to estimate the bill for the two billing periods from 20/05/2024 to 28/11/2024 and writing off the	Debt not lawfully recoverable	FM

			difference between the estimated and billed amount.		
Retail water account	10832	\$300.96	The customer was charged for 99 kL of usage during the period of 08/05/2024 to 21/08/2024. However, the cyble unit did not transmit usage data correctly due to a low battery, and no usage was recorded for the last 11 months. During the last meter reading cycle, the meter reader manually recorded the meter reading, which resulted in the customer being charged for the usage of 99 kL. On 02/12/2024, the water operator attempted to verify the meter reading; however, the reading was difficult to confirm due to the condensation on the display, and the screen wiper was broken. The customer has historically shown minimal water usage over the past three years. Staff recommended this charge to be written off.	Attempt to recover debt not cost effective	FM
	TOTAL	\$4,195.64			

Table 3

Explanation of write-off reasons

Reason for write-off	Explanation
Error in assessment	Occurs when a system error results in an incorrect amount being charged.
Debt not lawfully recoverable	Situations where the debt is not lawfully recoverable including instances where a proven failure of Rous' infrastructure has resulted in the excess water usage.
Court decision	Based on a decision from a court ruling.
Not cost effective	Occurs when the debt is assessed as not being commercially cost effective to recover.

Governance

- Finance

Retail Water Customer Account Assistance

The 2024/25 financial year budget allocation for applications made in accordance with the 'Retail Water Customer Account Assistance' policy is \$25,000.

Budget Table S356/S582

2024/25 financial year budget	\$25,000.00	No. of applications
S356 assistance reported in the July to December 2024 period (Table 1)	\$7,704.12	7
Budget remaining 2024/25 financial year	\$17,295.88	

Debt Write-Off

Charges written off during the period 1 July 2024 to 31 December 2024 total \$4,195.64 and this amount will be included in Council's Annual Report.

- Legal

Retail Water Customer Account Assistance

Section 356 of the LG Act allows Council to 'contribute money or otherwise grant financial assistance'.

Section 377(1A) of the LG Act allows Council to delegate to the General Manager authority to grant financial assistance provided it is (a) part of a specified program (b) included in the Operational Plan (c) the program budget does not exceed 5% of Council's income for that year, and (d) the program applies to all persons uniformly.

Debt Write-Off

Clause 131(6) of the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021* requires the General Manager to inform Council of any amounts written off under delegated authority.

Conclusion

During the period July to December 2024, the total value of financial assistance granted by the General Manager under delegated authority, and in accordance with Council's 'Retail Water Customer Account Assistance' policy equated to \$7,704.12.

Charges totalling \$4,195.64 were written-off under Council resolution and delegated authority pursuant to clauses 131 or 213 of the *Local Government (General) Regulation 2021*. The next Retail Water Customer Account assistance and debt write-off information summary report will be included in the August 2025 business paper.