

Investigation Report:

File No.	ACMA2024/1126
Carriage Service Provider	TelcoPlus Pty Ltd
ACN	105 243 418
Relevant Legislation	<i>Telecommunications Act 1997</i> <i>Telecommunications (Financial Hardship) Industry Standard 2024</i>

Findings

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (**ACMA**) finds that TelcoPlus Pty Ltd (**TelcoPlus**) contravened subsection 128(1) of the *Telecommunications Act 1997 (the Act)* by failing to comply with paragraph 7(1)(a) of the *Telecommunications (Financial Hardship) Industry Standard 2024 (the Financial Hardship Standard)* on 22 May 2024.

Background

1. On 31 August 2023, the Minister for Communications made the *Telecommunications (Financial Hardship Industry Standard) Direction 2023* which directed the ACMA to determine a standard under subsection 125AA(1) of the Act, dealing with:
 - (a) information relating to financial hardship matters that was to be provided by carriage service providers (**CSPs**) to customers and made available to customers, and potential customers;
 - (b) support to be provided by CSPs to customers who are, or may be, experiencing financial hardship.
2. On 1 February 2024, the ACMA made the Financial Hardship Standard under subsection 125AA(1) of the Act. The Standard commenced on 29 March 2024. The new rules in the Standard replace and enhance previous financial hardship measures set out in the Telecommunications Consumer Protections Code C628:2019 (**the TCP Code**).
3. On 21 May 2024, the ACMA commenced an investigation into TelcoPlus's compliance with paragraph 7(1)(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard. The ACMA audited 48 telcos including TelcoPlus, which disclosed evidence that led the ACMA to believe that TelcoPlus may not have complied with requirements in the Financial Hardship Standard. Specifically, that TelcoPlus failed to establish and publish a payment assistance policy and a summary of that policy on their website that meets the minimum requirements of Part 2 of the Financial Hardship Standard.
4. On 27 May 2024, the ACMA provided its preliminary findings report to TelcoPlus and invited it to respond. TelcoPlus did not contest the ACMA's preliminary

findings and confirmed by email dated 14 June 2024 that it had updated its Policy and Policy Summary to address the issues raised in the preliminary findings report.

Findings and Reasons

Section 128 of the Act

5. Section 128 of the Act states that if an industry standard that applies to participants in a particular section of the telecommunications industry is registered under Part 6 of the Act, each participant in that section of the industry must comply with the standard.
6. The Financial Hardship Standard is an industry standard determined under subsection 125AA(1) of the Act and registered under Part 6 of the Act.
7. Paragraph 4(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard provides that for the purpose of subsection 125AA(1) of the Act, this industry standard applies to participants in the telecommunications industry, being CSPs that supply telecommunications products to residential, small business and not-for-profit customers.
8. TelcoPlus is a CSP that supplies mobile services to the public. As a participant in the section of the telecommunications industry to which the Financial Hardship Standard applies, TelcoPlus is required to comply with the Financial Hardship Standard.

Paragraph 7(1)(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard

9. Paragraph 7(1)(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard provides that CSPs that offer to supply telecommunications products to consumers under a consumer contract must establish a payment assistance policy (**Policy**) that meets the minimum requirements in Part 2 of the Standard. These minimum requirements relate to the content to be included in the Policy and the accessibility and promotion of the Policy.
10. On 22 May 2024, the ACMA accessed TelcoPlus' Policy through TelcoPlus' website at <https://www.telcoplus.com.au>. On 22 May 2024, the ACMA reviewed TelcoPlus' Policy and formed the view that TelcoPlus contravened paragraph 7(1)(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard for the reasons set out below. A copy of TelcoPlus' Policy that the ACMA assessed is at **Attachment A**.

Breach findings

Provision of <i>Financial Hardship Standard</i>	Requirement	ACMA findings and reasons
Paragraph 8(1)(d)	A Policy must be accurate and up to date	TelcoPlus' Policy refers to the Telecommunications Consumer Protections Code C628:2019 and not the new Financial Hardship Standard. TelcoPlus' Policy is not accurate and up to date as it does not meet a range of content requirements as outlined in the rows below.

		Consequently, TelcoPlus' Policy has not been updated to meet the minimum requirements under the Financial Hardship Standard.
Subparagraph 8(1)(g)(i)	<p>The Policy must be made clearly available to the public on the provider's website and on an app if the provider uses an app:</p> <p>(i) via a direct hyperlink from the home page of the website.</p>	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy link was found via a hyperlink titled 'Policies' on TelcoPlus' homepage https://www.telcoplus.com.au, and then via a list on TelcoPlus' 'Policies' webpage (see Attachment B).</p> <p>Consequently, the Policy was not made clearly available via a direct hyperlink from TelcoPlus' home page as required.</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' home webpage on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that TelcoPlus' Policy does not meet the minimum accessibility requirement under paragraph 8(1)(g) of the Financial Hardship Standard on 22 May 2024.</p>
Subparagraph 8(1)(g)(ii)	<p>The Policy must be made clearly available to the public on the provider's website and on an app if the provider uses an app:</p> <p>(ii) in a concise summary form on the same web page or location that the information about how to make an application and payment assistance policy are kept.</p> <p>Section 13 sets out what must be included in the summary referred to in subparagraph 8(1)(g)(ii).</p>	<p>TelcoPlus does not have a summary of its Policy (Policy Summary) available on its website (see Attachment C).</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' website on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that it does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 13(a), and thus does not meet the minimum requirements under paragraph 8(1)(g) of the Financial Hardship Standard.</p>
Paragraph 9(c)	<p>A Policy must include a statement of intention, which expressly recognises:</p> <p>(i) that the goal of the Policy is to prioritise keeping customers experiencing financial hardship connected; and</p> <p>(ii) that disconnection will only be used by the provider as a measure of last resort</p>	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy states that 'if you [a customer] wish to stay connected with us, some options include: ...'. A copy of TelcoPlus' Policy is available at Attachment A.</p> <p>However, TelcoPlus' Policy does not state that disconnection will be used as a measure of last resort (requirement (ii)).</p> <p>For paragraph 9(c) to be satisfied, both requirements in subparagraph 9(c)(i) and (ii) must be met. As subparagraph 9(c)(ii) has not been met, based on its review of TelcoPlus' Policy on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that</p>

		TelcoPlus' Policy does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 9(c) of the Financial Hardship Standard.
Paragraph 9(d)	The Policy must state that customers have a right to apply for financial hardship assistance	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy states 'We encourage you to contact us if you experience any difficulties paying our services...'</p> <p>However, TelcoPlus' Policy does not state that customers have a right to apply for financial hardship assistance.</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' Policy on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that it does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 9(d) of the Financial Hardship Standard.</p>
Paragraph 9(g)	The Policy must set out information on support services for customers in financial hardship, including how the customer can contact financial counselling services, and the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (the TIO)	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy does not set out information on how customers can contact the TIO.</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' Policy on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that it does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 9(g) of the Financial Hardship Standard.</p>
Paragraph 11(d)	The Policy must state that customers seeking short term assistance or who are a victim survivor of domestic or family violence are not required to provide evidence to support their application	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy does not state that customers seeking short term assistance or who are a victim survivor of domestic or family violence are not required to provide evidence to support their application for financial assistance.</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' Policy on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that it does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 11(d) of the Financial Hardship Standard.</p>
Paragraph 12(b)	The Policy must set out the process by which the customer can make a complaint to the TIO for external dispute resolution	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy does not include information about how customers can make a complaint to the TIO for external dispute resolution.</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' Policy on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that it does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 12(b) of the Financial Hardship Standard.</p>

Paragraph 12(c)	<p>The Policy must state that making a complaint</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to the provider about a decision in relation to their application or seeking review of that decision, or • to the TIO, <p>does not prevent the customer from agreeing to an arrangement for financial hardship assistance</p>	<p>TelcoPlus' Policy does not include the required statement.</p> <p>Therefore, based on its review of TelcoPlus' Policy on 22 May 2024, the ACMA finds that it does not meet the minimum content requirement under paragraph 12(c) of the Financial Hardship Standard.</p>
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Conclusion

Based on its review of TelcoPlus's Policy on 22 May 2024, for the reasons set out above, the ACMA finds that TelcoPlus has not complied with paragraph 7(1)(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard, as it has not established a payment assistance policy that complies with the minimum requirements in Part 2 of the Financial Hardship Standard. Consequently, the ACMA finds that TelcoPlus has contravened subsection 128(1) of the Act as it has not complied with paragraph 7(1)(a) of the Financial Hardship Standard.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: TelcoPlus' Financial Hardship Policy as at 22 May 2024

Attachment B: TelcoPlus' Homepage as at 22 May 2024

Attachment C: TelcoPlus' Policies Page as at 22 May 2024