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| Account reconciliation operational guidelines  February 2020 |
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# Revision history

| Version | Amended section | Effective | Details |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1.0 |  | February 2020 | Date of issue  Inclusion of Emergency Rent Refund process  Note: These operational guidelines are a revision of the original Account Reconciliation chapter of the Tenancy Management manual. |

To receive this publication in an accessible format contact [Housing Practice and Complex Support](mailto:housing.practicesupport@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <housing.practicesupport@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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# When do these operational guidelines apply?

The purpose of these guidelines is to outline the processes by which the Department of Health and Human Services (the department) manages the reconciliation of public housing tenants’ current or vacated accounts on behalf of the Director of Housing. These operational guidelines can be used to determine when/how refunds can be processed on a tenancy account, what charges are issued to a current or vacated account and what other account adjustments can be applied to a tenancy depending on the circumstance.

The aim is to ensure the department provides a fair and consistent approach for all clients by considering each tenant’s circumstances and applying correct processes to resolve any outstanding financial matters relating to tenancy accounts.

# Overview

All Residential Tenancy Agreements with the Director of Housing (the Director) commence on a Sunday. Households may be charged market rent or be eligible for a rental rebate based on their income. The amount charged to the tenant is referred to as the weekly payment amount. The weekly payment amount is charged on a weekly basis from the Sunday after the weekday the tenancy commences and every Sunday thereafter.

When a tenant signs a Residential Tenancy Agreement, an account is generated with a unique reference number for that tenancy known as the service ID and is used to record all financial transactions and account actions. This information enables staff to perform an account reconciliation when necessary, usually at the request of the tenant.

An account is reconciled to demonstrate how the account balances were determined. This involves:

* examining transaction records and tenancy actions
* balancing debit and credit entries
* identifying where discrepancies may have occurred.

## Discretion under these operational guidelines

There are certain circumstances where a VPS5 delegate or above may take contributing factors around a client into consideration when making decisions under these operational guidelines. These may include tenancies where mental health, disability or family violence issues have been identified and discretion about the next course of action may be appropriate.

## Involvement with other programs or supports

While investigating a tenancy account and any discrepancies, staff may identify that a tenant or their household have complex needs and may require access to appropriate services and support in order to assist them with sustaining their tenancy. Staff should work with tenants and their households to identify and link them to supports such as:

* financial counselling services
* community based mental health services
* National Disability Insurance Scheme, or
* family violence support agencies

If a tenant declines to engage with support services or providers, staff should file note attempts to engage with the tenant and proceed with the account reconciliation as requested.

However, should staff learn of, or witness, a situation that raises concerns regarding a child’s welfare, they must report their concerns to their line manager and determine the appropriate course of action in line with the Exchange of information between Child Protection and Public Housing (2017).

It is mandatory that concerns for a child’s welfare are reported by contacting:

* Victoria Police if there is a reasonable belief that a crime against a child has been committed
* Child Protection if there is a reasonable belief that a child needs protection.

## Human rights considerations

All departmental staff are required to consider the potential impact of any proposed action on the person’s (and their household’s) rights under the [Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (2006)](https://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/the-charter) <https://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/the-charter>.

By taking a human rights-based approach, the department must ensure the client and tenant are at the centre of all decisions made. It does not mean that tenant’s human rights can never be limited. It means that any decisions made that do limit the tenant’s human rights must be lawful, necessary, logical, reasonable and proportionate.

Staff who take action in line with these operational guidelines must:

* understand the objective and rationale of the actions they are taking
* consider the impact of a proposed action on the person’s Charter rights (more than one might be relevant)
* consider whether the proposed impact is balanced, proportionate and necessary to achieve the objectives for these operational guidelines, (for example, in a situation involving anti-social behaviour which breaches the obligations of the tenancy agreement, is the decision to evict, and the subsequent impact on the tenants and/or household members, balanced with the Director’s objective to reduce the negative impact on neighbours?) and;
* choose the least restrictive measure available

This assessment needs to be individualised for the tenant, and any other affected household members. It requires staff to follow the process outlined in *the Human Rights Charter* when considering human rights as part of the decision-making process.

# Account transactions

The department assigns a unique ten-digit reference number, called a service ID, to every rental account. All account transactions are recorded against each service ID on the department’s client database known as the Housing integrated information Program (HiiP). Account transactions are date ordered, and include:

* rental charges
* rental adjustments
* rebates
* rebate adjustments
* rental subsidies
* rental subsidy adjustments
* payments (weekly payment amount and maintenance)
* refunds (weekly payment amount and maintenance)
* service charges
* water consumption charges
* parking bay charges
* tenant maintenance charges
* miscellaneous adjustments
* journal entries

# Account charges

The department sends account statements to tenants upon request and generally as part of the arrears process when an account falls into arrears. There are two types of balances on each account:

* weekly payment amount (this includes service charges, water consumption charges and car parking bay charges)
* other (this includes water charges incurred prior to 1994 and maintenance charges)

## Weekly payment charges

The amount that tenants pay the Director towards their rent is referred to as a ‘weekly payment amount’. The weekly payment amount:

* is 25 per cent of primary household income (and 15 per cent of family payment income) if a tenant is eligible for a rental rebate or equals the market rent where the tenant is not eligible for a rental rebate and
* includes service charges (if applicable) and a
* debt repayment agreement amount (if applicable)

The weekly payment amount is charged in advance to the rental account on the first Sunday of the tenancy and every Sunday thereafter and is charged up to the actual day the tenancy is terminated, which may be mid-week.

## Other charges

Charges other than the weekly payment amount may also be incurred, such as:

* maintenance charges (previously referred to as tenant responsibility charge)
* service charge
* water charge
* car parking bay charge
* sleep out charge

### Maintenance charge

When the department attempts to recover costs for maintenance works carried out on rented premises that are considered the responsibility of the tenant, a Maintenance Claim Against a Tenant (MCAT) is pursued. It is expected that all department staff comply with the Victorian Model Litigant Guidelines and the principles of procedural fairness when they manage tenant property damage. For more information, please refer to the [*Application of the Victorian Model Litigant guidelines to tenant property damage*](https://dhhsvicgovau.sharepoint.com/sites/Publichousingresources/SitePages/Property-and-Maintenance.aspx) on the Public Housing Resource SharePoint page <https://dhhsvicgovau.sharepoint.com/sites/Publichousingresources/SitePages/Property-and-Maintenance.aspx>.

If an MCAT is substantiated at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), or the tenant has accepted liability for the damage and signs a *Notice of Acceptance of Responsibility for Damage* letter, the charges are debited to the tenant’s account as a maintenance charge.

### Service charge

High-rise or walk-up properties may incur an added charge to the weekly payment amount, known as a service charge, if the property has a common laundry or does not have individual meters for services such as hot water, heating, gas and/or electricity.

### Water charge

Since 1 January 1998, the department has applied a water charge to recover water consumption and sewerage disposal costs from tenants residing in bulk-metered premises. The weekly service charge is passed onto tenants at varying rates depending on the bedroom size of the property.

### Car Parking Bay charge

Some inner-city public housing estates have car parking bays that can be leased to tenants. A car parking bay charge is applied to a tenant’s rental account on a weekly basis and is in addition to their weekly payment amount as outlined in the [*Car Parking in public housing operational guidelines*](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual>.

### Sleep out charge

The rental charge for a sleep out is $3.00 per week and is added to the market rent of the property. As the sleepout becomes a permanent structure of the property, the additional charge does not affect the weekly payment amount of tenants who are entitled to a rental rebate.

# Account management

## Payment in advance

In accordance with the Residential Tenancy Agreement, tenants are required to pay their weekly payment amount in advance. This means that a payment must be made before the charge is applied on Sunday it is charged.

Tenants are encouraged to pay their weekly payment amount on a weekly, fortnightly or four-weekly basis through Centrelink’s Rent Deduction Service or by bank direct debit. Each payment must place the rental account balance a minimum of one payment amount in credit. For example, if a tenant pays fortnightly, their rental account balance must be in credit by two weeks after each payment, as outlined in the [*Arrears operational guidelines*](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual>.

## Account adjustments

### Market rent adjustments

Market rents are based on the rental return that would be expected from a departmental property if it were rented privately. The department, on behalf of the Director, reassesses market rents annually in August as the result of new valuations from a qualified independent valuer.

The Director charges market rent to all tenants and provides rental rebates to part of that charge to eligible tenants who apply, according to the [*Rent setting and rebate operational guidelines*](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/rent-setting-and-rebate-operational-guidelines) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/rent-setting-and-rebate-operational-guidelines>.

### Rebate assessment adjustments

The rebate entitlement of a tenant is assessed according to the department’s *Rent setting and rebate operational guidelines*. Rebate assessments may be backdated to reflect changes in a household or household income. A lump sum may then be credited to or debited from the rental balance of the account. Backdated rebate assessments are limited to a period of twenty-six weeks and discretion for further backdates must be sought from a VPS5 delegate or above.

### Miscellaneous credits and debits

A miscellaneous credit or debit adjustment may be applied as a last resort solution to accounts for discrepancies in weekly payment charges, rebates, service charges, water charges and car parking bay charges. This usually occurs when the tenancy start date has been incorrectly entered.

### VCAT determinations

An account may be adjusted if a VCAT determination orders the Director to:

* reduce a specified amount from a rental or maintenance debt
* compensate a tenant for transport costs and/or loss of income
* compensate a tenant for damaged goods
* further reduce a weekly payment amount.

## Rental subsidies

A rental subsidy is a grant or payment given to a tenant to reduce their weekly payment amount. It is different from a rental rebate, which is assessed on the household income. Rental subsidies can be applied by staff or by the Revenue and Accounts Receivable Section (RARS) following approval by a VPS5 delegate or above. RARS is located at 50 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, 3000. All enquiries should be made on telephone number (03) 9096 5258.

A rental subsidy can be allocated to an account for the following reasons:

* property-related circumstances
* client-related circumstances
* Director of Housing discretion
* VCAT or the department’s Legal Services Branch ruling

For specific circumstances where these apply refer to the [*Rent setting and rebate operational guidelines*](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/rent-setting-and-rebate-operational-guidelines) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/rent-setting-and-rebate-operational-guidelines>.

## Journal transfers

Balances or receipts may be transferred from one account to another when:

* a credit in one account is used to pay a debit in another account
* a payment was made into the wrong account
* a credit in one balance is used to pay a debit in another balance of the same account. For example, a credit in a rental balance is used to pay a tenant’s maintenance charges.

## Refunds

A refund may be issued to a tenant when:

* a rental payment has been duplicated for the same payment period and it will result in the tenant experiencing financial difficulty. For example, a tenant makes a payment at the Post Office after terminating a direct debit service, but a payment is still deducted within the same payment period before the termination takes effect
* an overpayment has occurred through a direct debit arrangement and will result in the tenant experiencing financial difficulty. For example, a tenant has completed a repayment agreement for outstanding charges, but the agreement amount portion did not terminate on time and was still deducted
* a tenant has a credit on their rental or maintenance balance that is more than what is required for the tenant’s account to remain in credit at a minimum of one payment
* a tenant has a credit in their maintenance balance after they made a payment for an MCAT charge which was later reduced or deactivated.

Where possible, staff should seek agreement of all co-tenants as to how any refund should be distributed among them. For information regarding vacated accounts, please see the [*Vacated tenant accounts operational guidelines*](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual-vacated-tenants-accounts-word) <<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual-vacated-tenants-accounts-word>>

# Account reconciliation procedures

## Principles of account reconciliation

Tenants can request an account reconciliation at any time. The aim of an account reconciliation is to balance an account by:

* ensuring that all charges on the rental account have been applied according to departmental policy and procedures
* accounting for all payments made by the tenant and identifying missed payments or unpaid charges.

An account statement is printed, and the following items are checked:

### Charges

Staff are to examine the account statement for:

* charges that should have been applied but have not been. For example, a tenant returns from a temporary absence and the temporary absence subsidy charge has not been end dated
* charges that were incorrectly applied to the account. For example, a water charge was applied to an account for a property with an individual meter
* charges that were anticipated by a tenant but not applied to the account. For example, a tenant has paid an MCAT however the claim has not yet been substantiated at VCAT.

### Payments

Staff are to examine the account statement when there are:

* payments that are missing. For example, a tenant pays weekly but there is no payment for one week. Ask the tenant to provide their weekly payment receipts (or bank statement if paying by Direct Debit) and check these receipts against the information recorded on HiiP.
* payments that have been dishonoured. For example, the payment is credited and then debited two days later with the transaction comment “dishonoured payment”. Request that the tenant make up this payment.
* payments that are delayed. For example, the payment was by cheque and is awaiting clearance. Advise the tenant that they allow time for cheque clearance in the future.
* payments that were for the wrong amount. For example, a rebate assessment results in a change to the weekly payment amount but the tenant pays the old amount. Advise the tenant of the new amount payable and ask them to make up any insufficient rental payments.
* weekly payment amount deduction from Centrelink has not taken place. Where a discrepancy has occurred with the weekly payment deduction, check the details of the payment type and dates with that of Centrelink to ensure that they match.
* payments that were made at the wrong time. For example, a tenant usually pays their weekly payment amount every second Friday, but one week a payment is received on the following Monday. When this occurs, the tenant must pay again the following week or their account will no longer be paid in advance as required. (Refer to Payment in Advance).

Staff are to advise tenants not to make their payments by the calendar month as tenants paying monthly can fall into arrears because the months vary from 28 to 31 days in length. The frequency should be four-weekly instead.

### Balances

Staff are to print an account statement and examine if there is an unanticipated credit on either the rental or maintenance balance to a corresponding debit value. For example, the tenant has not made a payment on the week it was due, but a credit has appeared on the ‘other’ balance for the same amount as the tenant’s regular rental payment. This may indicate that the tenant has paid their weekly payment amount using their maintenance repayment card.

### Microfiche

Account transactions from December 1977 to June 1989 have been archived onto microfiche. Check with the local office or with the RARS for these records. Account transactions from July 1989 are recorded on HiiP.

### File notes

File notes/enquiry notes are used to provide detailed explanations on tenancy related issues. It is important to record any tenancy related issues in a file now on HiiP including all interactions with a tenant. Check for file notes on tenancy, property and/or rebate hardcopy files as well as on HiiP.

### Account adjustments

Before making any type of account adjustment, contact the RARS. Some account adjustments also require amendments to the property details which can only be performed by the RARS.

### Rebate assessment adjustments

Assess the rebate entitlement of a tenant according to the [Rent setting and rebate operational guidelines](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/rent-setting-and-rebate-operational-guidelines) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/rent-setting-and-rebate-operational-guidelines>.

Send the HiiP generated letter to the tenant. The letter advises the tenant of their new weekly payment amount, any backdated adjustments that were made to the account and, the new account balance.

### Miscellaneous credits and debits

Apply a miscellaneous credit or debit adjustment to weekly payment charges, rebates, service charges, water charges and car parking bay charges as a last resort solution to account discrepancies. When this is required due to an adjustment to a tenancy start date or end date:

* Obtain approval from a VPS4 delegate (or above) and forward the form to RARS. RARS will apply the miscellaneous adjustment and arrange for all HiiP data adjustments.
* Place a file note on HiiP and on the tenancy file with a detailed explanation of the reason for the adjustment.

### Rental rebate adjustments

Housing Services Officers (HSO) can approve a backdated rebated rent assessment that results in a credit adjustment to the tenant’s account of less than $1000.

A VPS 4 delegate in a local office can approve a backdated rebated rent assessment that results in a credit adjustment to the tenant of between $1,000 and $5,000.

A VPS 5 delegate in a local office can approve a backdated rebated rent assessment that results in a credit adjustment to the tenant’s account of between $5,000 and $15,000.

A VPS 6 delegate in a local office can approve a backdated rebated rent assessment that results in a credit adjustment to the tenant’s account of between $15,000 and $50,000.

Backdated rebated rent assessments that result in a credit adjustment to the tenant’s account of greater than $50,000 must be approved by an Area Director or equivalent in a division, subject to the Instrument of Delegation.

### Rental subsidy adjustments

Send all rental subsidy adjustments that have been approved by a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate to the RARS to process on HiiP.

### Service charge adjustments

Contact the RARS before placing a service charge adjustment on an account. Depending on the type of service charge adjustment, the property details and service charge indicator on HiiP may also need to be amended.

A HSO (1-3) can place a credit or debit service charge adjustment up to $100 on an account.

Obtain approval from a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate before applying a service charge adjustment between $100 and $200.

Send a credit or debit service charge adjustment over $200 to the RARS accompanied by a memorandum that has been endorsed by a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate.

### Water charge adjustments

Contact the RARS before placing a water charge adjustment on an account. The property details and water charge indicator on HiiP may also need to be amended.

A HSO (1-3) can place a credit or debit water charge adjustment up to $100 on an account.

Obtain the approval of a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate before applying a water charge adjustment between $100 and $200.

Send a credit or debit water charge adjustment over $200 to the RARS accompanied by a memorandum that has been endorsed by a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate.

### Car Parking Bay adjustments

A HSO (1-3) can place a credit or debit car parking bay adjustment up to $50 on an account.

Obtain the approval of a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate before applying a car parking bay adjustment between $50 and $100.

Send a credit or debit parking bay adjustment over $100 to the RARS accompanied by a memorandum endorsed by a VPS5 or VPS6 delegate.

### VCAT determinations

If a VCAT determination orders the Director to;

* reduce a specified amount from a rental or maintenance debt
* compensate a tenant for transport costs and/or loss of income
* compensate a tenant for damaged goods
* further reduce a weekly payment amount.

Enter the details on HiiP and forward a copy of the determination to the RARS for processing.

If the determination is to reduce in part or in full a maintenance debt that was substantiated in a previous VCAT determination, contact the Housing Practice Support team for advice at [housing.practicesupport@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:housing.practicesupport@dhhs.vic.gov.au).

# Journal transfers

Transfer a balance or receipt when:

* a credit in one account is used to pay a debit in another account
* a payment was made into the wrong account
* a credit in one balance is used to pay a debit in another balance of the same account.

Only perform a journal transfer at the request of the tenant(s) with their consent in writing.

## Transfer between accounts

Transfer a credit balance between accounts with the consent of the tenant(s):

* from a vacated account to a current account

– where a tenant has transferred to another departmental property

– where there has been a tenancy transfer for the same property

* from a current account that is in excess credit (greater than the amount required for weekly payment amount in advance) to a vacated account with outstanding charges.

If a credit is to be transferred from an account that is to be vacated, terminate the account and obtain a final balance before transferring the credit. Check that any recent payments made by cheque or direct debit have been honoured by the bank or financial institution.

Do not transfer a credit balance where there are MCATs or anticipated MCATs for either account. The request to transfer a credit between balances should be forwarded to the RARS after the MCAT has been finalised.

A debit transaction can only be performed up to the close of business on the Friday of the week the account is terminated. Ensure that the tenant’s rental account will maintain a credit balance as required. (Refer to *Payment in Advance*). Send debit adjustments from a vacated account after this period to the RARS.

## Transferring receipts

Transfer a receipt with the consent of the tenant(s) when:

* there has been a transfer of tenancy and payments were made into the previous account
* a payment has been made into the wrong account. For example, into another tenant’s account or into a vacated account.

A receipt from a vacated account can only be transferred by a HSO up to the close of business on the Friday of the week the account is terminated. To transfer receipts after this period, send a memorandum to the RARS.

## Transfer between balances

Transfer an excess credit to pay or reduce a maintenance debt at the written request of a tenant, when a rental account has a credit of more than what is required for payment in advance.

The reverse is also possible but should only be performed with prior approval from the RARS. Check that there are no MCATs for the account. A maintenance balance in credit may indicate that a tenant has made a payment for an unsubstantiated maintenance claim or an MCAT was reduced or deactivated after payments were made.

## Large credit account balances

### Credits exceeding $750

Nett account balances of large credits of more than $750 should be discouraged. The credit balance may be due to rebated rent assessment backdates or intentional extra payments made by tenants who may choose to suspend rental payments to allow for other expenses around certain times of the year while maintaining their rental account balance in advance.

### Outstanding charges

A current tenancy account with a large credit account balance should be actioned once all outstanding charges have been considered. This is performed according to [Arrears operational guidelines](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual-arrears-word) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/tenancy-management-manual-arrears-word>.

# Requests for refund

## Standard procedure- through HiiP

Refunds are to be paid using the “Perform Miscellaneous Refund” function in HiiP. Refunds for current tenancies are actioned by the tenant’s local office. Refunds for all terminated accounts are actioned by the RARS.

Refunds can be for either duplicate payments, or credit balances. Duplicate payments occur when a rental payment has been duplicated for the same period. For example, a tenant terminates a direct debit service, but a payment is still deducted, and the tenant has also paid at the Post Office. If a tenant requests a refund for this reason, check with the financial institution that they have honoured a payment by bank direct debit or cheque before a refund is issued.

Alternatively, a tenant may request a refund where they have a credit on their rental or maintenance balance that is more than what is required for the tenant’s account to remain in credit a minimum of one payment.

Before performing a refund, a tenant must be a registered vendor. A request to make a tenant a registered vendor is sent to vendor management from HiiP. This request needs to specify how the vendor is to be paid (i.e. by cheque or EFTPOS). If the tenant is to be paid by EFTPOS, bank account details must be provided before the tenant can be set up as a vendor. This should be provided on the Request for refund form. Staff should attach the refund claim form in the Finance tab so that the vendor creation can proceed.

Once the tenant is a registered vendor, staff will receive an email to state that the tenant has been created as vendor in HiiP, and a refund can be processed. All refund amounts must be escalated for manager approval. The following approval limits apply in an area office:

* refunds of up to $5,000 may be approved by a VPS 4 in an area office
* refunds of up to $15,000 may be approved by a VPS 5 in an area office
* refunds of up to $50,000 may be approved by a VPS 6 in an area office.

## Emergency rent refunds

Refunds from the Director of Housing’s Emergency Rent account should only be given in cases where an error has occurred by the department or Centrelink and the tenant’s financial situation is such that they require immediate reimbursement. This type of refund can only be done for a duplicate rental payment and will result in an immediate payment to the tenant through a cheque being issued by the local office and processed in HiiP by central office. For example, a duplicate rental payment can occur when a tenant’s direct debit has been cancelled however a direct debit payment has still been paid into the account and the tenant has also made a manual rental payment at the post office.

In this situation, complete the ‘Reimburse DoH Emergency Rent Refund account’ form and ensure this form is emailed to [DoH.EmergencyRentRefund@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:DoH.EmergencyRentRefund@dhhs.vic.gov.au) on the same day of processing.