

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 27 June 2021

As part of the Essential Services Commission's role in administering the customer protection framework in Victoria's water sector, we began collecting data in April 2020 on the support provided to customers to track the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. This data reflects the extent of support provided to customers who are having difficulty paying their water bills. We are also regularly interviewing water businesses to better understand the support measures they have implemented and the actions they are taking to support their customers.

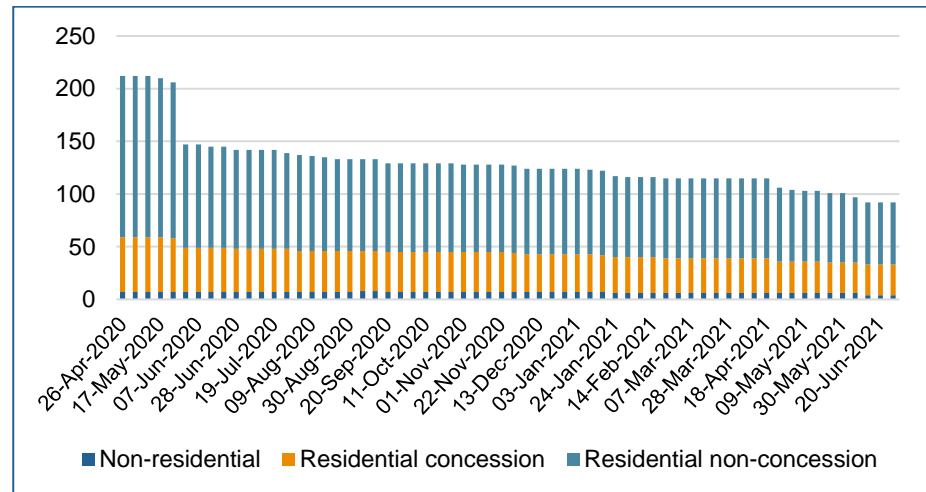
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during June compared to May.** The average weekly application rate was 578 in June, up from 474 in May. In the past month there was a peak of 670 weekly applications and a low of 476 applications.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants has increased in June compared to May and is trending higher than last year.** On average 264 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in June, 51 (24 per cent) more than the May average and 94 (55 per cent) more than the pre-pandemic norm of 170. Before February this year the number of metropolitan customers receiving hardship grants largely remained below the pre-pandemic norm but has since trended well above the norm. In regional Victoria, the June weekly average was 396 grants, 56 fewer than the May weekly average and over five times the pre-pandemic norm (about 75 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of regional customers on water business hardship programs increased by 155 (2.6 per cent) from 6,069 at the end of May to 6,224 at the end of June.** There was also a small increase in Melbourne, where the figure at the end of June was 20,602 compared to 20,513 at the end of May (0.4 per cent increase).
- **Water businesses have generally stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills since at least late April.** At the end of June, 92 customers across the state still have their supply restricted, nine fewer than at the end of May.

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

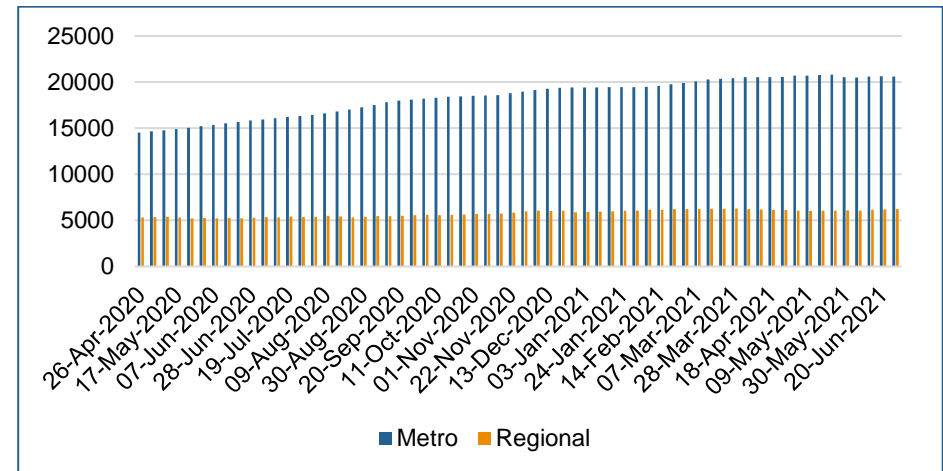
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 92 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of June, representing a decrease of nine since the end of May. The number of water supply restrictions in place has gradually decreased since reporting started in April 2020, when the number of restrictions in place was 212.
- 59 residential non-concession customers, 29 residential concession customers and 4 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

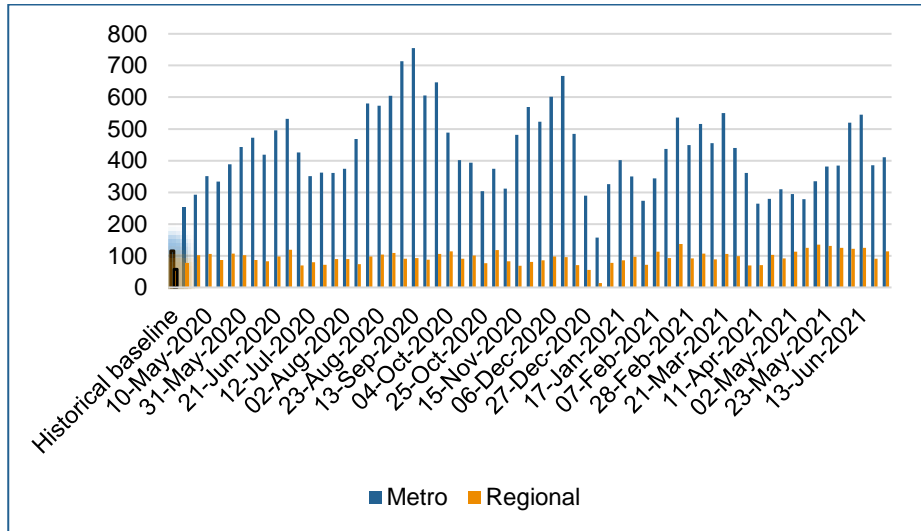
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased by 244 (0.9 per cent) in June, bringing the total to 26,826. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs increased by 89 customers (0.4 per cent) from 20,513 at the end of May to 20,602 at the end of June.
- In regional areas, the number was 6,224 at the end of June, 155 (2.6 per cent) more customers than at the end of May.
- On average, 497 customers entered and 436 exited water business hardship programs each week in June.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

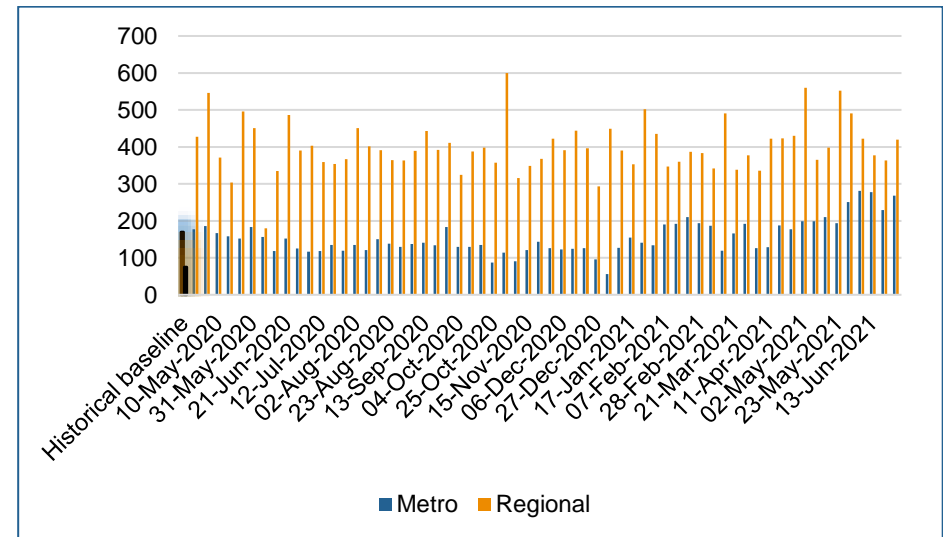
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in June was 578, an increase from the May average of 474. In the past month there was a peak of 670 weekly applications and a low of 476 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for June was just over four times the historical average. We have observed that the number of metropolitan customers applying for utility relief grant applications has been spiking roughly every three months – this trend is being driven by one metropolitan water retailer and aligns with its quarterly billing cycle.
- In regional Victoria, the average weekly application rate in June was almost twice the historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

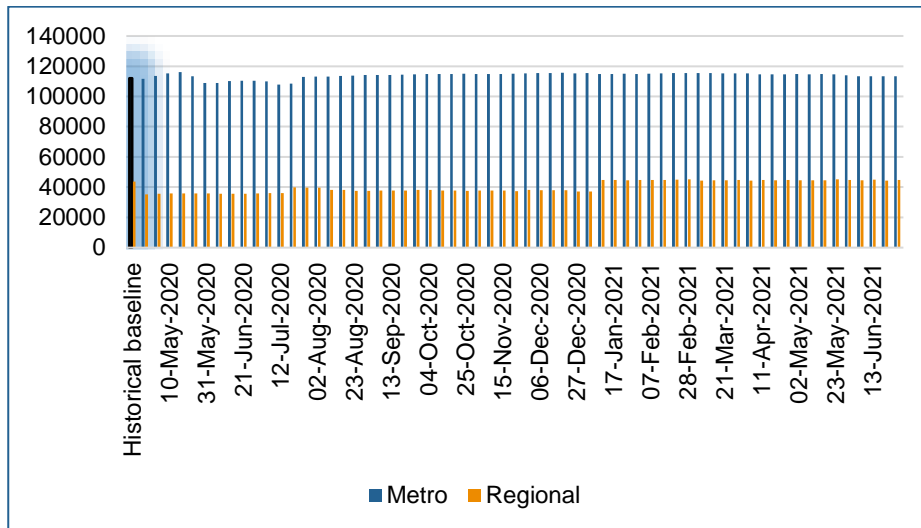
Past month (industry total):



- The June weekly average of 660 customers awarded hardship grants is slightly lower than the May weekly average of 665 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for June was 264 grants, 51 more grants than the May weekly average, and 94 more than the historical weekly average of 170 grants. The number of metropolitan customers receiving grants has started to trend well above the historical average since about February this year.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for June was 396 grants, 56 fewer grants than the May weekly average, and over five times the historical weekly average of 75 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week

Past month (industry total): slightly 



- There were 158,182 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of June, a decrease of 615 (0.4 per cent) compared to the end of May.

About the data: Data is reported weekly by water businesses and is not audited by the commission. We are collecting a small subset of the annual data that is included in our annual water performance report. Definitions of the performance indicators we collect are available on our website at www.esc.vic.gov.au/water-performance-reports.

The historical baseline included in some of the charts above shows a typical weekly figure for that measure, which we calculated using available data reported to us in previous years as part of normal annual performance reporting. These baselines can be considered as pre-pandemic norms and serve as a comparison to the current weekly reported data.