

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 3 April 2022


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.

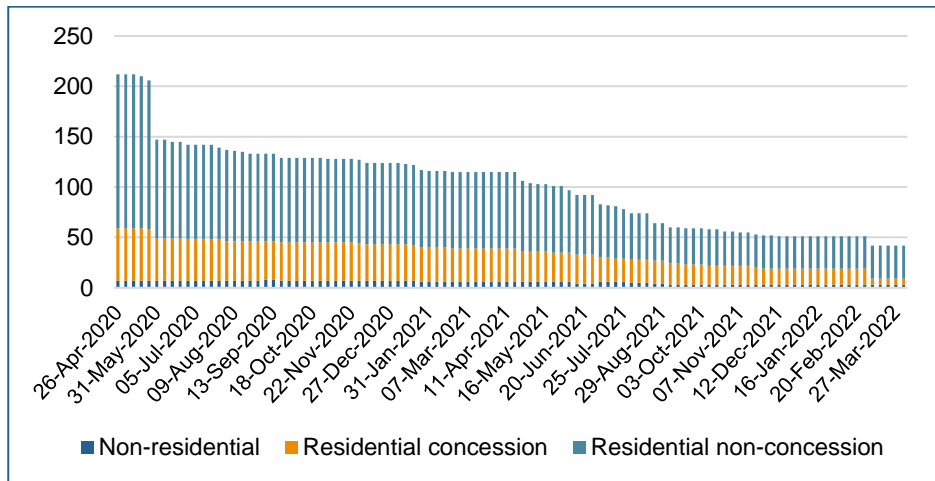
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government utility relief grants during March compared to February.** The average weekly application rate was 683 in March, up from 572 in February. In the past month there was a peak of 765 weekly applications. In metropolitan Victoria the average weekly application rate rose to 543 in March, up from 434 in February.
- **The weekly number of customers awarded hardship grants decreased in March compared to February.** On average 223 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in March. This was 70 fewer than the February average of 293 per week. In regional Victoria, the March weekly average was 242 grants, 15 fewer than the February weekly average of 257. This is over three and a half times the regional pre-pandemic norm (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs increased by 601 (2.8 per cent) from 21,289 at the end of February to 21,890 at the end of March.** The number of regional customers on water business hardship programs increased by 64 (1.1%) from 5,840 at the end of February to 5,904 at the end of March.
- **Water businesses have generally stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills since at least late April 2020.** At the end of March, 42 customers across the state currently have their water supply restricted, nine fewer than the number reported at the end of February.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place increased by 1,278 in March, to 152,447 at the end of the month.**


Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

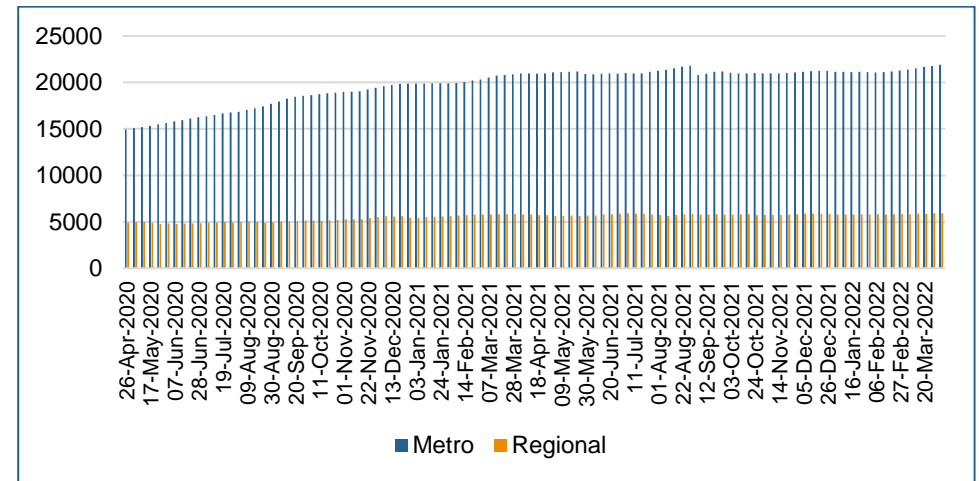
Past month (industry total): 



- A total of 42 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of March, nine fewer customers than what was reported at the end of February.
- 33 residential non-concession customers, 6 residential concession customers and 3 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

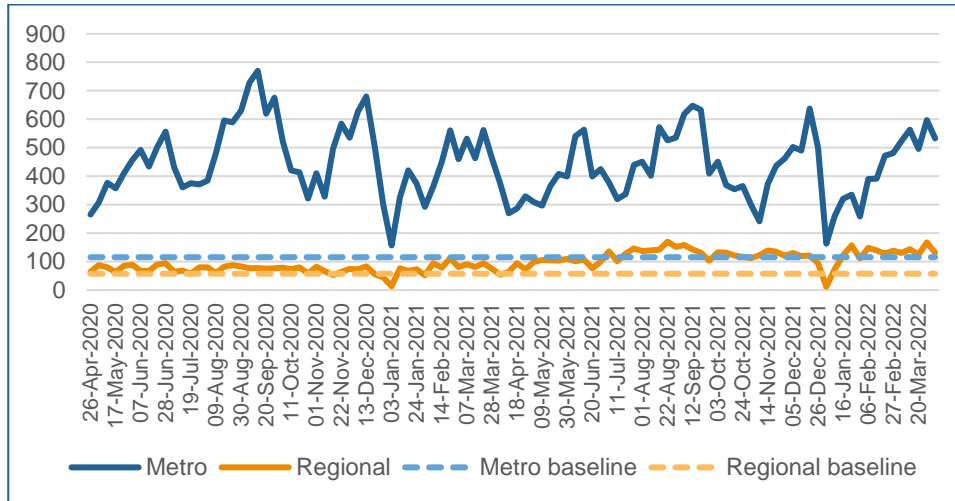
Past month (industry total): 



- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased by 665 (2.5 per cent) in March, bringing the total to 27,794 at the end of the month. 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 601 customers (2.8 per cent) from 21,289 at the end of February to 21,890 at the end of March. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of March was 5,904, an increase of 64 from the end of February when there were 5,840 regional customers on hardship programs.
- On average, 480 customers entered and 347 exited water business hardship programs each week in March.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

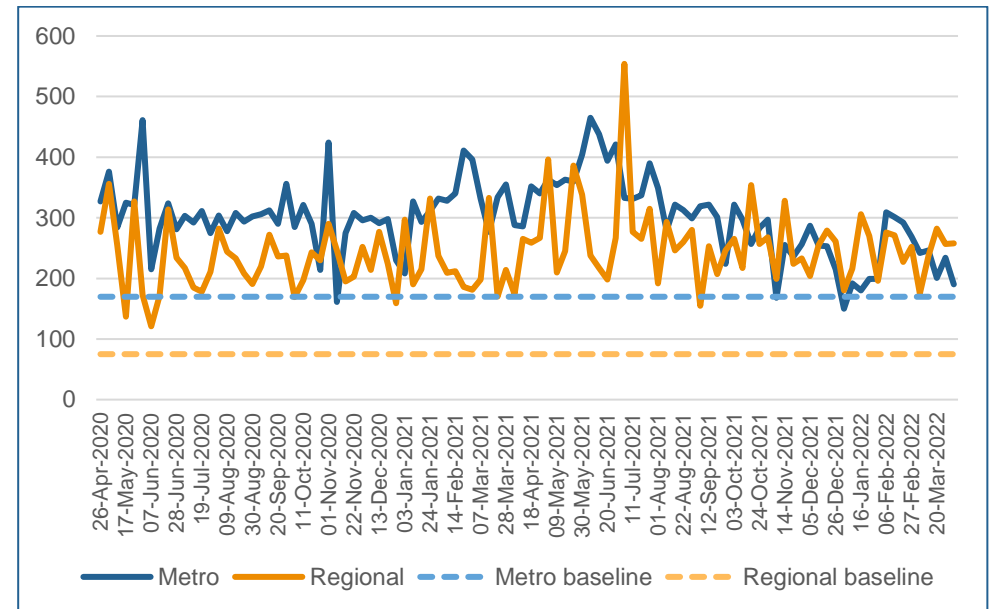
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in March was 683, an increase on the February average of 572. In the past month there was a peak of 765 weekly applications and a low of 621.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for March was 543, a 25 per cent increase on the February average of 434 and just under four and a half times the pre-pandemic baseline. The number of metropolitan customers applying for the utility relief grant 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 increased slightly from 139 in February, to 140 in March. This is over double the pre-pandemic historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

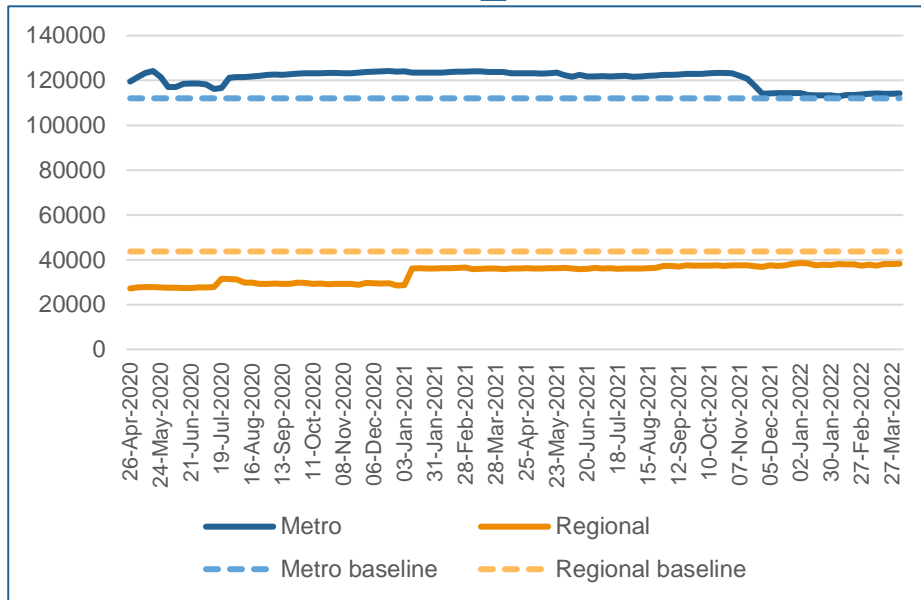
Past month (industry total):



- The March weekly average of 464 customers awarded hardship grants is lower than the February weekly average of 549 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for March was 223 grants, 70 fewer than the February weekly average, but 25 per cent higher than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for March was 242 grants, 15 fewer than the February weekly average and over three and a half times more than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 67 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week

Past month (industry total): slightly 



- There were 152,447 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of March, an increase of 1,278 (0.8 per cent) compared to the end of February.

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.