

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 31 October 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.

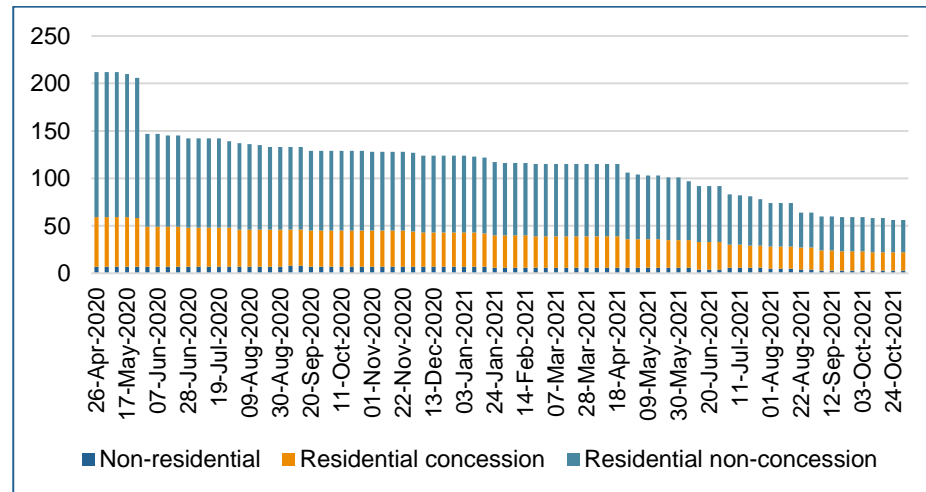
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **Fewer customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during October compared to September.** The average weekly application rate was 468 in October, down from 686 in September. In the past month there was a peak of 501 weekly applications and a low of 412 applications. In metropolitan Victorian, the average weekly application rate decreased to 347 in October from 552 in September.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants decreased in October compared to September.** On average 284 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in October. This was 14 fewer than the September average of 298 but still 106 more than the pre-pandemic norm of 178. In regional Victoria, the October weekly average was 274 grants, 49 more than the September weekly average. This level is over four times the pre-pandemic norm (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs decreased by 80 (0.4 per cent) from 21,047 at the end of September to 20,967 at the end of October.** There was also a decrease of 35 customers in regional Victoria, where the figure at the end of October was 5,743 compared to 5,778 at the end of September (a 0.6 per cent decrease).
- **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 October, 56 customers across the state currently have their supply restricted, three fewer than at the end of September.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place has increased by 399 in October, to 160,731 at the end of the month.**

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

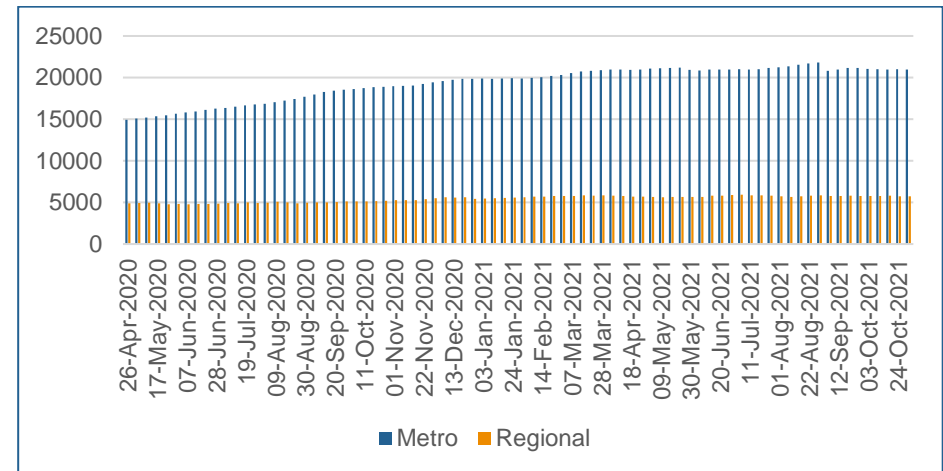
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 56 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of October, a decrease of three since the end of September.
- 34 residential non-concession customers, 19 residential concession customers and 3 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

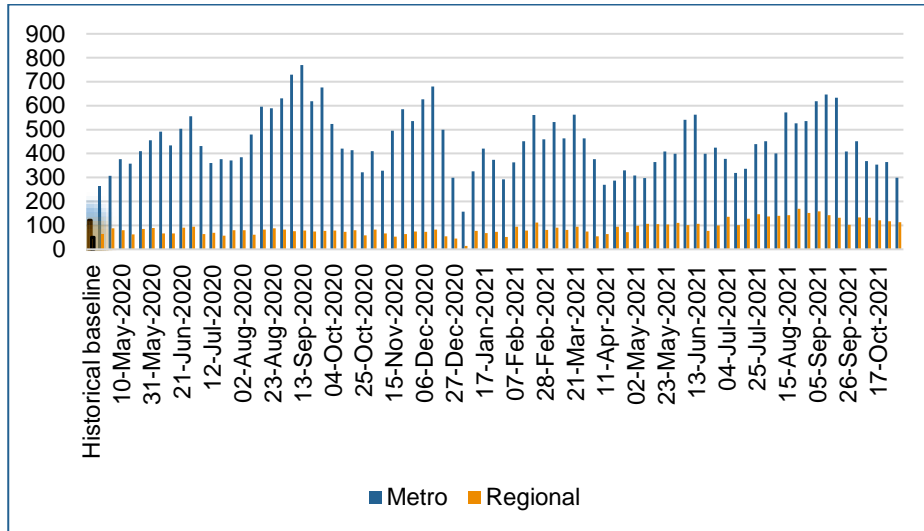
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs decreased by 115 (0.4 per cent) in October, bringing the total to 26,710. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs decreased by 80 customers (0.4 per cent) from 21,047 at the end of September to 20,967 at the end of October. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of October was 5,743. This is 35 (0.6 per cent) fewer customers than at the end of September.
- On average, 389 customers entered and 418 exited water business hardship programs each week in October.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

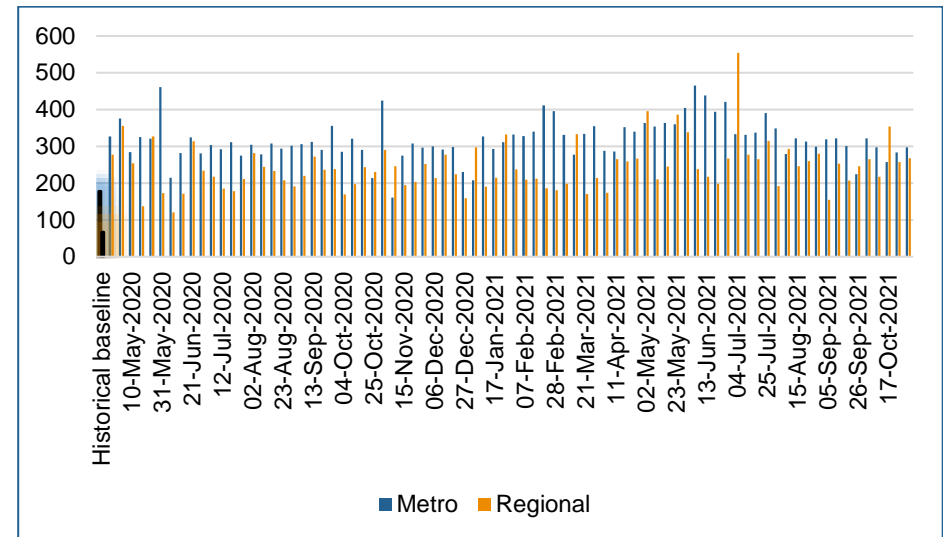
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in October was 468, a decrease on the September average of 686. In the past month there was a peak of 501 weekly applications and a low of 412 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for October was 347, a decrease on the September average of 552 and close to three times pre-pandemic the historical average. 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 decreased to 121 in October, from 134 in September.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

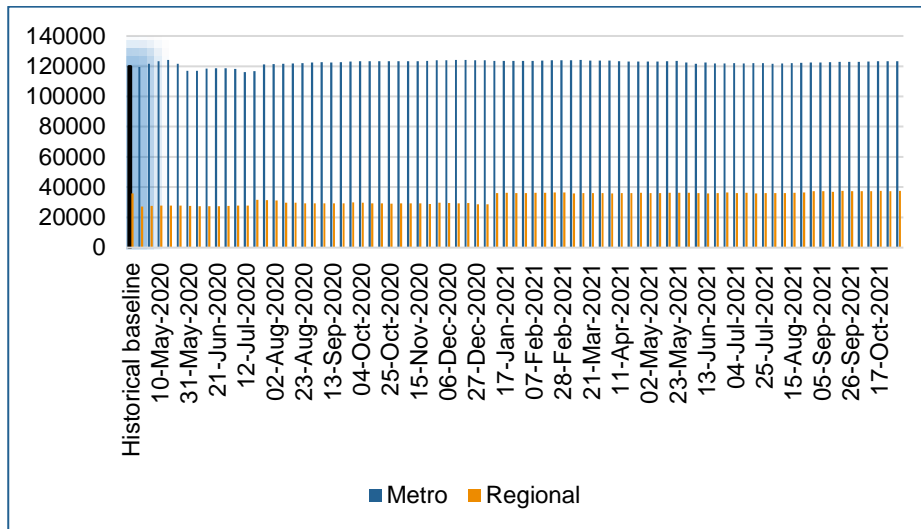
Past month (industry total):



- The October weekly average of 558 customers awarded hardship grants is higher than the September weekly average of 523 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for October was 284 grants, 14 fewer than the September weekly average, but 106 more than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for October was 274 grants, 49 more than the September weekly average and over four times the pre-pandemic weekly average of 67 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week

Past month (industry total):



- There were 160,731 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of October, an increase of 399 (0.2 per cent) compared to the end of September.

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.