

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 29 August 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.

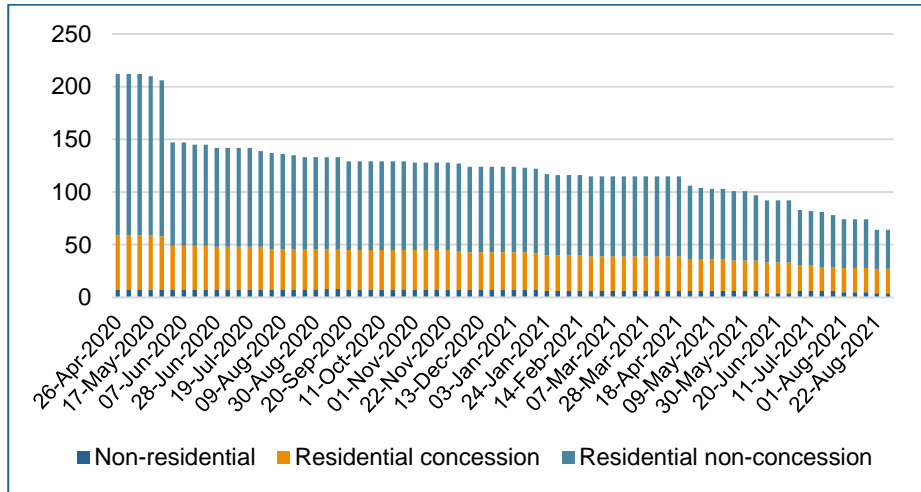
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during August compared to July.** The average weekly application rate was 660 in August, up from 515 in July. In the past month there was a peak of 714 weekly applications and a low of 541 applications. The average weekly application rate in regional Victoria of 151 application was at its highest level since we started reporting, potentially linked to the ongoing lockdown across Victoria.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants has decreased in August compared to July.** On average 303 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in August. This was 45 fewer than the July average of 348 but still 125 more than the pre-pandemic norm of 178. 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 that level. In regional Victoria, the August weekly average was 270 grants, 51 fewer than the July weekly average. This level is just over four times the pre-pandemic (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs increased by 572 (2.7 per cent) from 21,243 at the end of July to 21,815 at the end of August.** There was also an increase of 115 customers in regional Victoria, where the figure at the end of August was 5,851 compared to 5,736 at the end of July (a 2.0 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 August, 64 customers across the state still have their supply restricted, ten fewer than at the end of July.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place has increased by 1,975 in August, to 159,687 at the end of the month.**

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

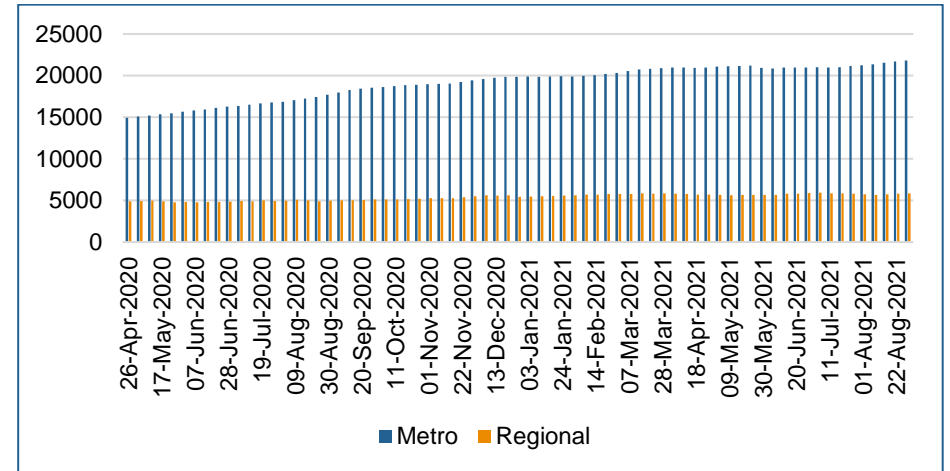
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 64 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of August, a decrease of ten since the end of July.
- 37 residential non-concession customers, 23 residential concession customers and 4 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

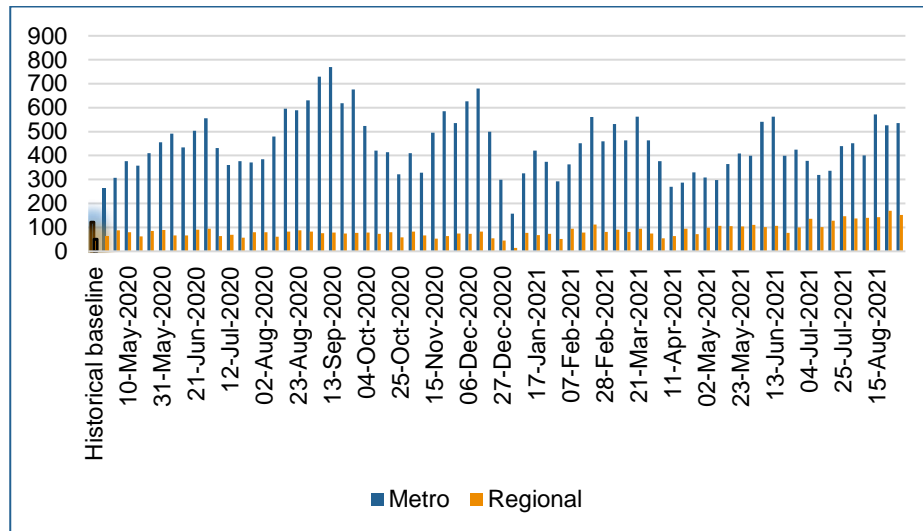
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased by 687 (2.5 per cent) in August, bringing the total to 27,666. This is about 1.0 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers. This increase was largely driven by two water businesses, which accounted for 81.4 per cent (559 customers) of the increase of 687 customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs increased by 572 customers (2.7 per cent) from 21,243 at the end of July to 21,815 at the end of August. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of August was 5,851. This is 115 (2.0 per cent) more customers than at the end of July.
- On average, 521 customers entered and 349 exited water business hardship programs each week in August.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

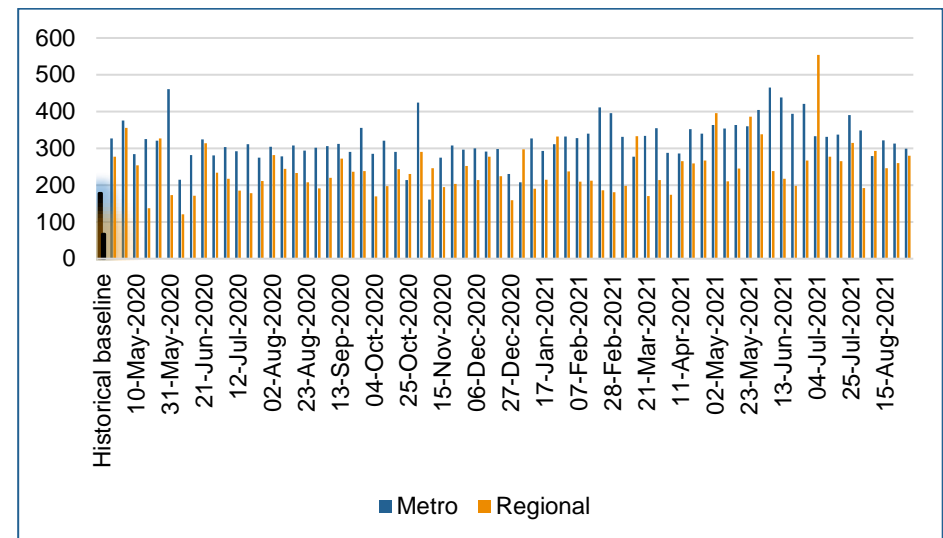
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in August was 660, an increase on the July average of 515. In the past month there was a peak of 714 weekly applications and a low of 541 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for August was 509, just over four 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 in August was 151, the highest it's been since we started reporting and just under three times the pre-pandemic historical average of 51.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

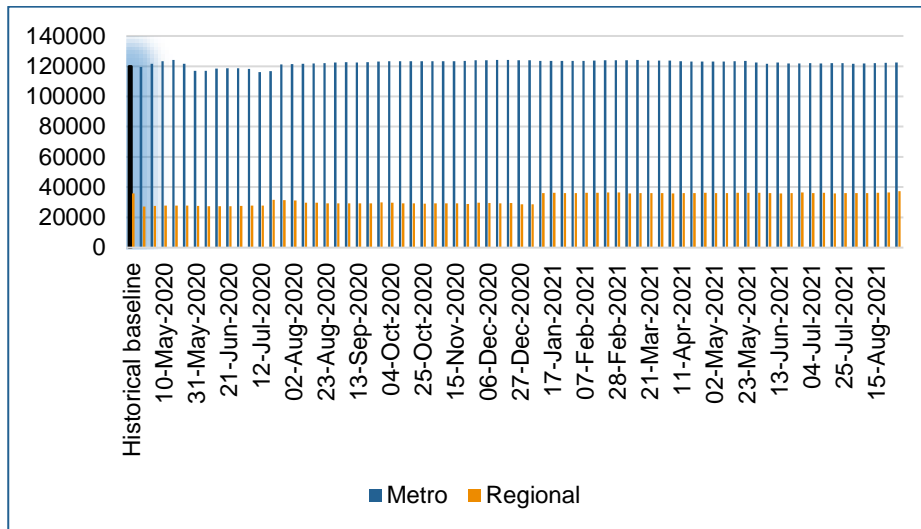
Past month (industry total):



- The August weekly average of 573 customers awarded hardship grants is lower than the July weekly average of 669 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for August was 303 grants, 45 fewer than the July weekly average, but 125 more than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants. The number of metropolitan customers receiving grants started to trend well above the historical average from around February 2021.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for August was 270 grants, 51 fewer than the July weekly average, but still just 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 159,687 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of August, an increase of 1,975 (1.3 per cent) compared to the end of July.
- The increase was largely driven by one water business reporting an additional 1,084 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of August compared to the end July.

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.