

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering the last two months' data to 31 January 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.

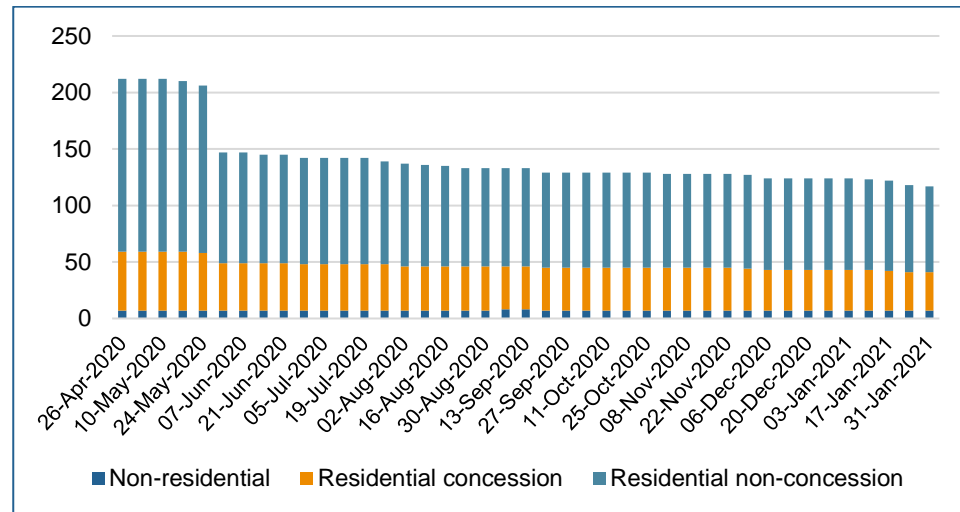
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key Insights

- **Victoria's water businesses continue to provide additional support to customers during the pandemic.** Water businesses have been proactive in reaching out to customers, including small business and other non-residential customers, to ensure they are aware of existing support programs as well as new support measures developed in response to the pandemic.
- **Fewer customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during January compared to December, and November.** The average weekly application rate was 421 in January, down from 506 in December and 550 in November. In the past two months there was a peak of 700 applications at the start of December and a low of 171 in the week after Christmas – this dip during the holiday period is not unexpected, and has since returned to previous rates.
- **On average, more customers received hardship grants from their water business in January than in December and November.** The January weekly average of 559 customers awarded hardship grants was 12 per cent higher than December's average of 500, which in turn was 3 per cent higher than the November average.
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs has steadied over recent weeks, rising by just 0.2 per cent in January to 19,454 compared to an increase of 2.4 per cent in December.** In regional areas, the figure fluctuated between about 5,900 and 6,100 from week to week – at the end of January it was at 6,061 compared to 5,903 at the end of December.
- **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 January, 116 customers across the state still have their supply restricted.

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

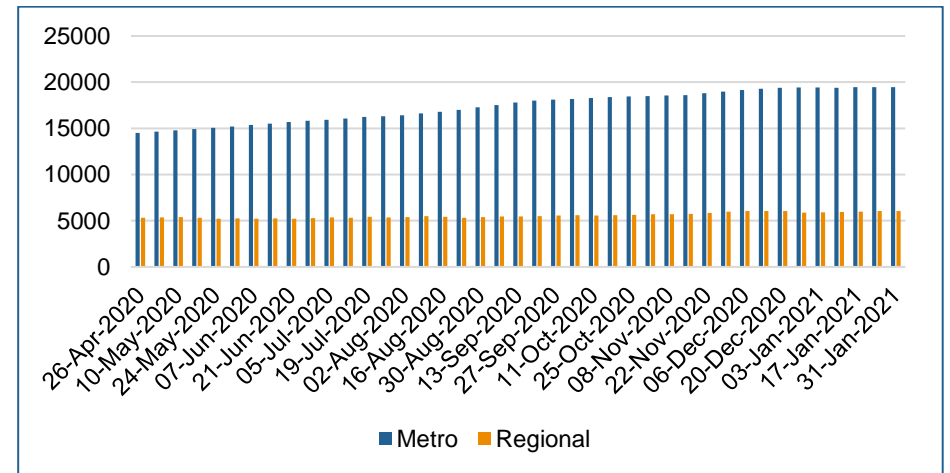
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 124 customer had their water supply restrictions in place at the end of December, falling to 116 customers at the end of January. This continues the downward trend since April when weekly reporting started, and the number of restrictions in place was 212.
- 76 residential non-concession customers, 34 residential concession customers and 6 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

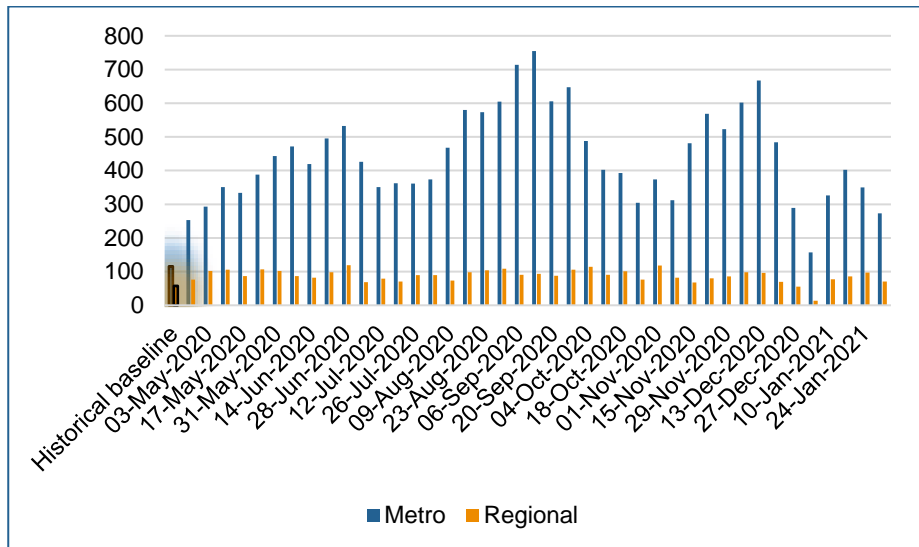
Past month (industry total): slightly



- The total number of customers in hardship programs rose by 390 (1.6 per cent) in December, and by 192 (0.8 per cent) in January, bringing the total to 25,515. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs also increased, rising from 18,964 at the end of November by 456 customers (2.4 per cent) at the end of December, and by just 34 customers (0.2 per cent) to 19,454 at the end of January.
- In regional areas, the number was 5,903 at the end of December, 66 fewer customers than at the end of November, but then rose by 158 (2.7 per cent) to 6,061 at the end of January.
- On average, 426 customers have entered and 284 exited water business hardship programs each week.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

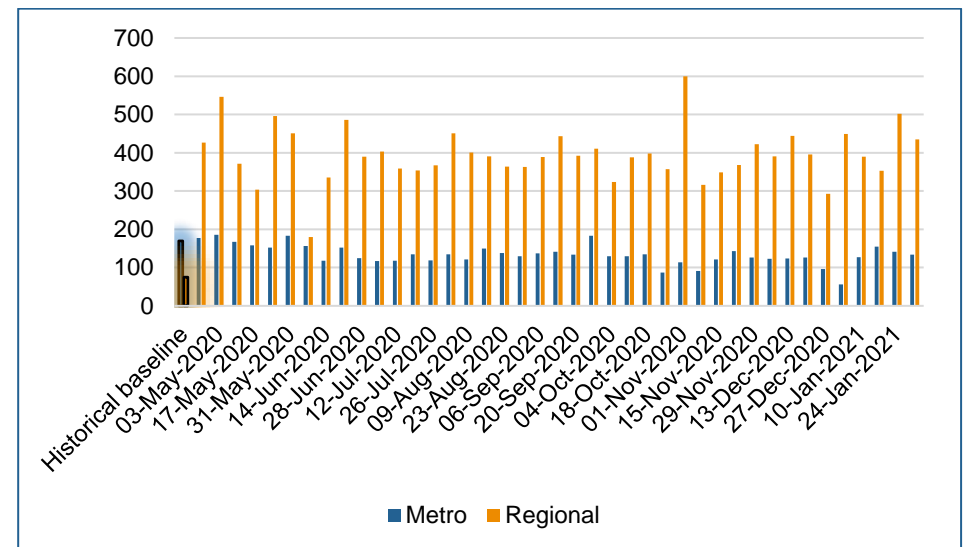
Past month average (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in December was 506, a decrease from the November average of 550. The average in January decreased further to 421 applications. In the past two months there was a peak of 700 applications at the start of December, and a low of 171 applications in the week after Christmas.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for both December and January was about four times the historical average.
- In regional Victoria, the average weekly application rate in December was 16 per cent above the historical average, and in January was about 44 per cent above.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

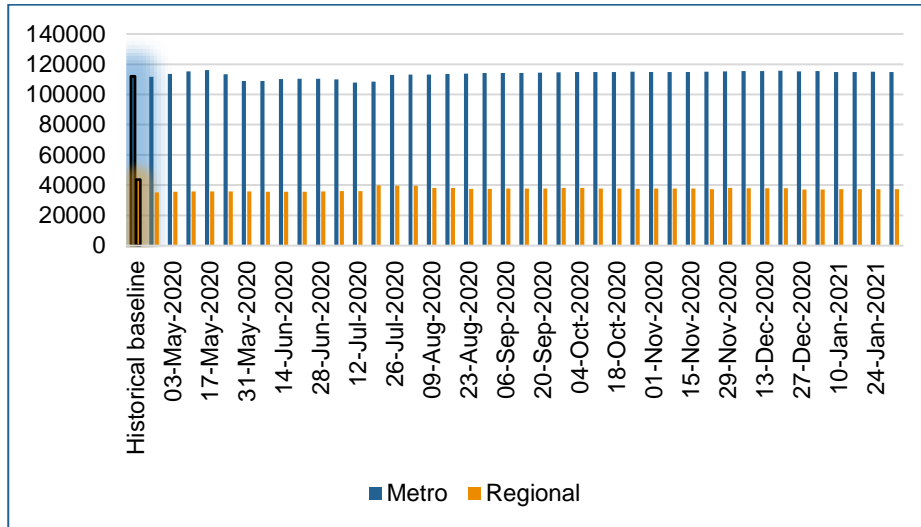
Past month average (industry total):



- The January weekly average of 559 customers awarded hardship grants was 12 per cent higher than December's average of 500, which was only 3 per cent higher than the November average (484).
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for January was 139 grants, and for December was 105 grants, both lower than the historical weekly average of 170 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for January was 420 grants, and for December was 395 grants, both more than 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



- The number of customers on payment instalment plans decreased by 896 (0.6 per cent) at the end of December compared to the end of November and again by a further 350 (0.2 per cent) to 152,257 at the end of January.

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.