

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 1 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.

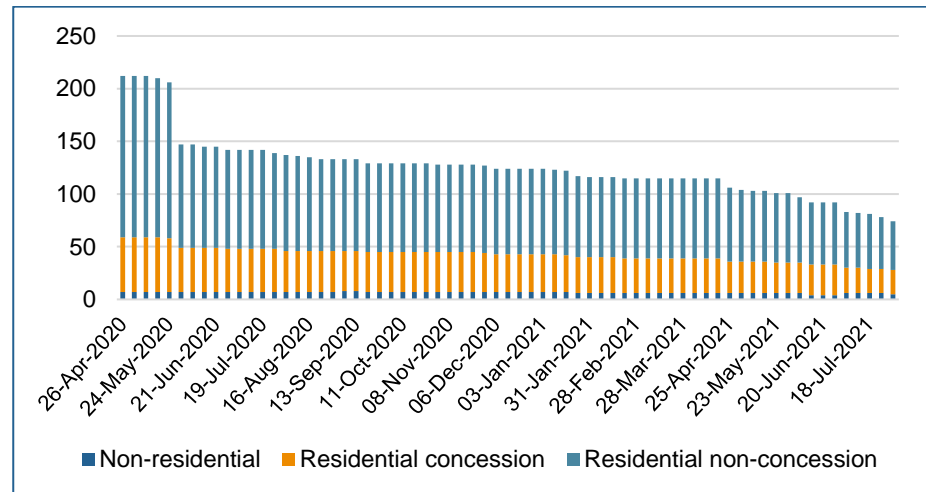
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- As of 1 July 2021 City West Water and Western Water merged to become Greater Western Water. We will continue to receive data from Greater Western Water for each of the former business areas and aggregate the data for our reporting purposes. We have reclassified the former Western Water business area as a metropolitan water business.
- **Fewer customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during July compared to June.** The average weekly application rate was 515 in July, down from 578 in June. In the past month there was a peak of 588 weekly applications and a low of 420 applications.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants has decreased in July compared to June.** On average 348 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in July. This was 82 fewer than the June average of 430 and 170 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 July weekly average was 321 grants, 91 more than the June weekly average. This level is almost five times the pre-pandemic (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of regional customers on water business hardship programs decreased by 137 (2.3 per cent) from 5,873 at the end of June to 5,736 at the end of July.** There was a small increase in Melbourne, where the figure at the end of July was 21,243 compared to 20,953 at the end of June (1.4 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 July, 74 customers across the state still have their supply restricted, 18 fewer than at the end of June.

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

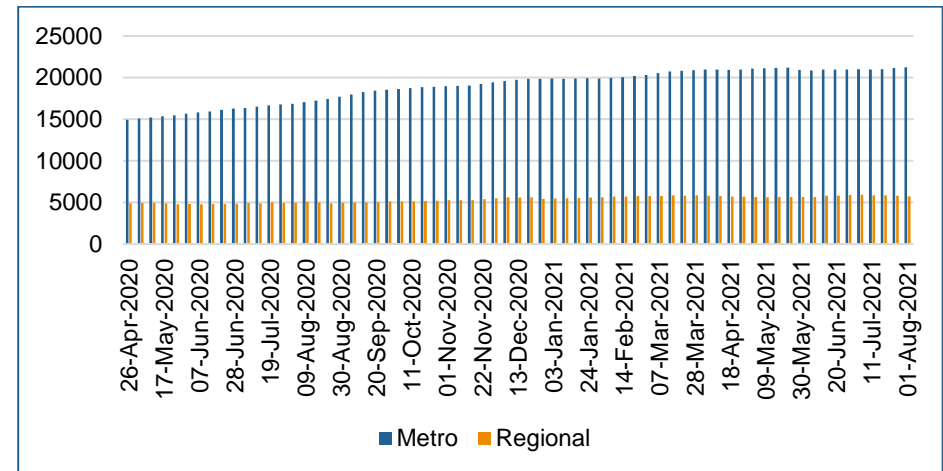
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 74 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of July, representing a decrease of 18 since the end of June. The number of water supply restrictions in place has gradually decreased since reporting started in April 2020.
- 46 residential non-concession customers, 23 residential concession customers and 5 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.
- Last month we reported there were 4 restrictions in place on non-residential water customers at the end of June, this has increased to 5 at the end of July after one water business reclassified two existing restrictions as non-residential, and another water business lifted a restriction on a non-residential customer in July.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

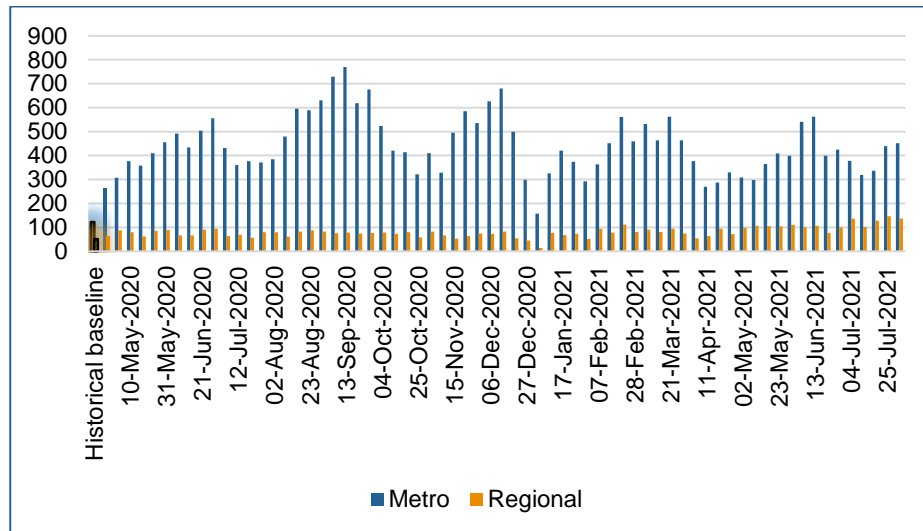
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased slightly by 153 (0.6 per cent) in July, bringing the total to 26,979. 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 290 customers (1.4 per cent) from 20,953 at the end of June to 21,243 at the end of July.
- In regional areas, the number was 5,736 at the end of July, 137 (2.3 per cent) fewer customers than at the end of June.
- On average, 469 customers entered and 438 exited water business hardship programs each week in July.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

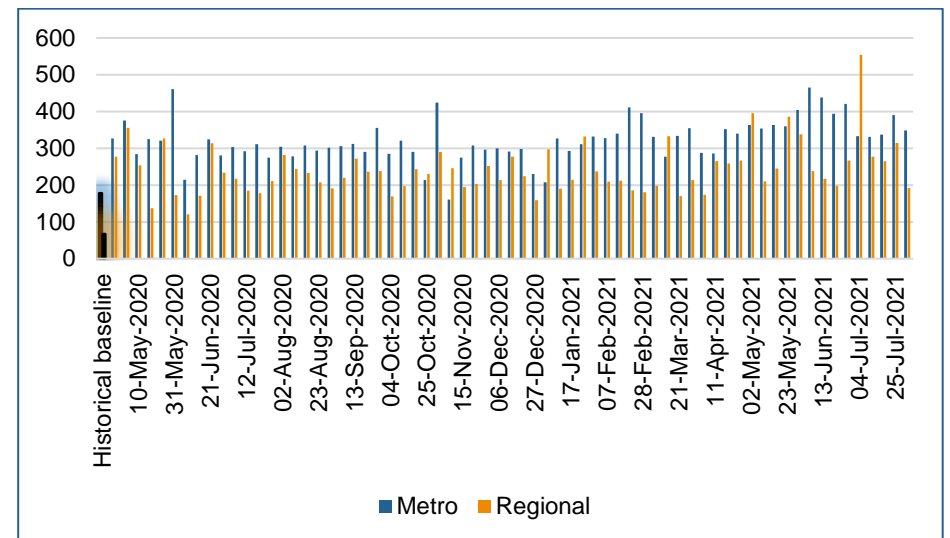
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in July was 515, a decrease from the June average of 578. In the past month there was a peak of 588 weekly applications and a low of 420 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for July was just over three times pre-pandemic the historical average. We have observed that 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 July was two and a half times pre-pandemic the historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

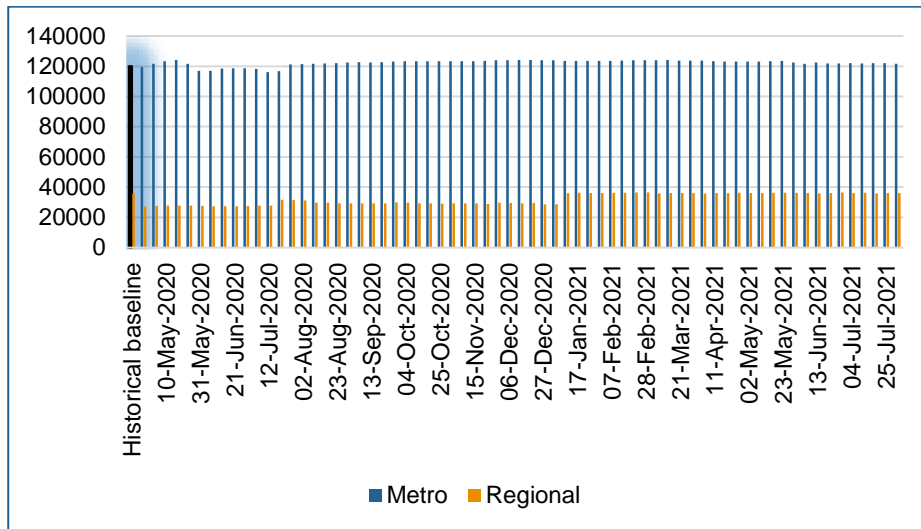
Past month (industry total):



- The July weekly average of 669 customers awarded hardship grants is slightly higher than the June weekly average of 660 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for July was 348 grants, 82 fewer grants than the June weekly average, and 170 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 July was 321 grants, 91 more grants than the June weekly average. This was almost five times above 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 157,712 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of July, a decrease of 470 (0.3 per cent) compared to the end of June.

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.