

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 30 August 2020

As part of the Essential Services Commission's role to administer the customer protection framework in Victoria's water sector, in April 2020 we began collecting data on the support provided to customers, given the community impacts of coronavirus. This data reflects the extent of support provided to customers who are having difficulty paying their water bills. We are also regularly interviewing each water business to better understand the support measures they have implemented and the actions they are taking to support their customers.

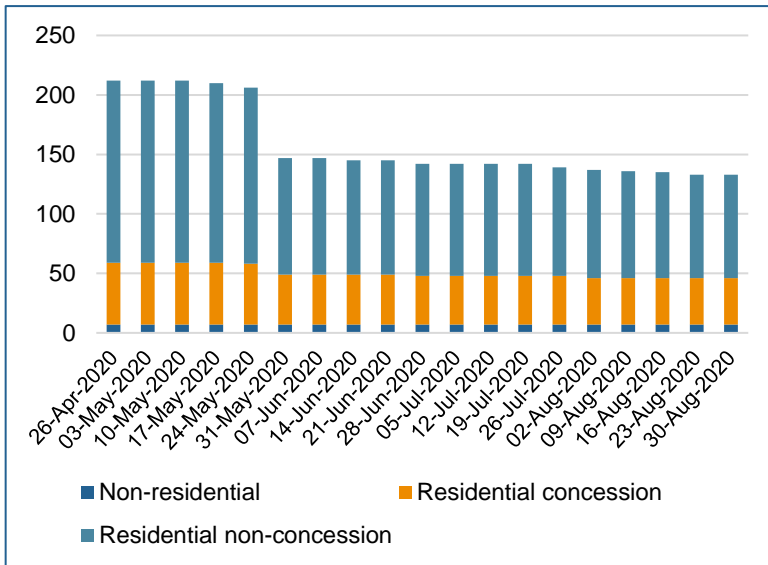
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **Overall, we consider Victoria's water businesses have responded well to provide additional support to customers during the pandemic.** Water businesses have been proactive in reaching out to customers to ensure they are aware of existing support programs as well as new support measures developed in response to the pandemic.
- **Support has also been extended to small business and other non-residential customers.** Victoria's water businesses have adopted the National Cabinet agreed principles for hardship support during the coronavirus pandemic. We have recently amended our Customer Service Codes for urban and rural water businesses to incorporate these national principles.
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs continues to steadily increase, rising from 14,521 in April to 17,270 at the end of August.** In regional areas, the number has fluctuated from week to week between 5,200 and 5,500, and was 5,385 for the final week of August.
- **More customers are applying for government Utility Relief Grants, particularly in the metropolitan area.** Weekly grant applications peaked at 651 in late June before dropping to 430 by mid-July, but have steadily increased since then to a new high of 714 for the last week of August. This is over four times the historical average of about 175 grant applications per week.
- **More customers are receiving hardship grants from their water business, especially in regional Victoria.** The number of customers awarded hardship grants at each business fluctuates week by week, but the statewide total is currently more than double the historical average of about 245 hardship grants per week, with 493 granted in the final week of August.

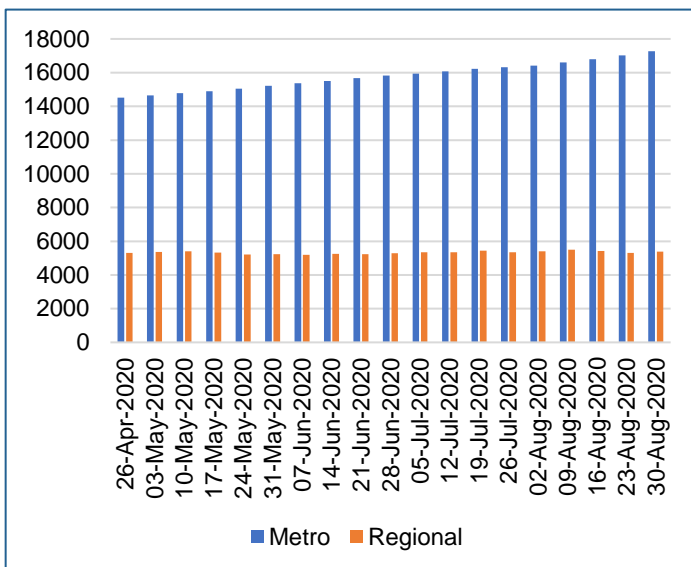
- **Water businesses have stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills since at least late April.** Many water businesses have removed customers' water supply restrictors since the pandemic began, but across the state 133 customers still have their supply restricted.

Number of customer water supply restrictions in place at end of week



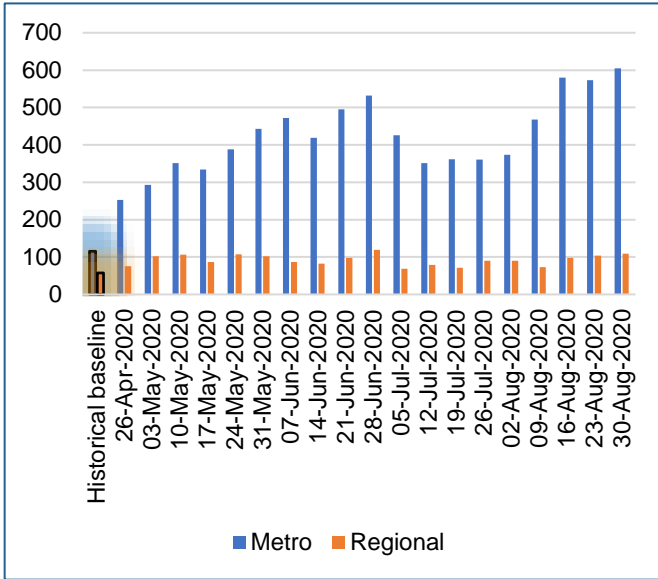
- A total of 133 customers had water supply restrictors in place at the end of August, compared with 212 in April when weekly reporting commenced.
- 87 residential non-concession customers, 39 residential concession customers and 7 non-residential customers still have their water supply restricted since at least late April.
- No new supply restrictions have been applied for non-payment of water bills since April.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week



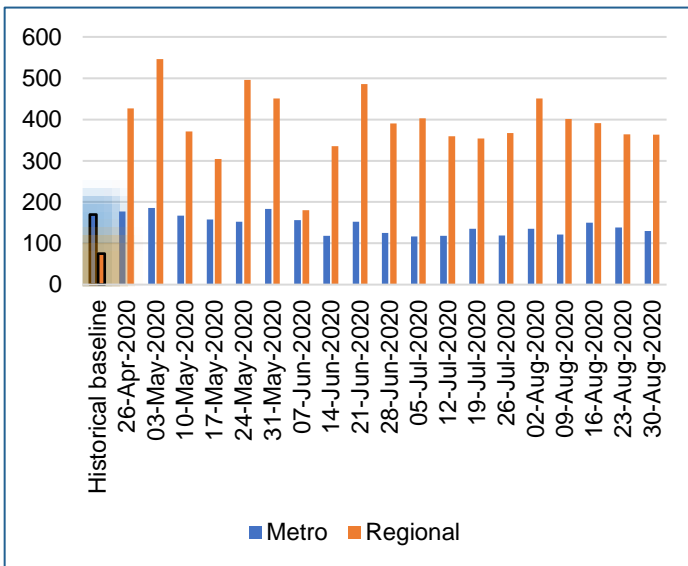
- The total number of customers in hardship programs was 19,832 in April, and has increased by 14 per cent to 22,655 by the end of August.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs continues to increase steadily, rising from 14,521 in April to 17,270 at the end of August, a 19 per cent increase.
- In regional areas the number has fluctuated between about 5,200 and 5,500, and was 5,385 at the end of August.
- On average, 429 customers have entered and 272 exited water business hardship programs each week.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week



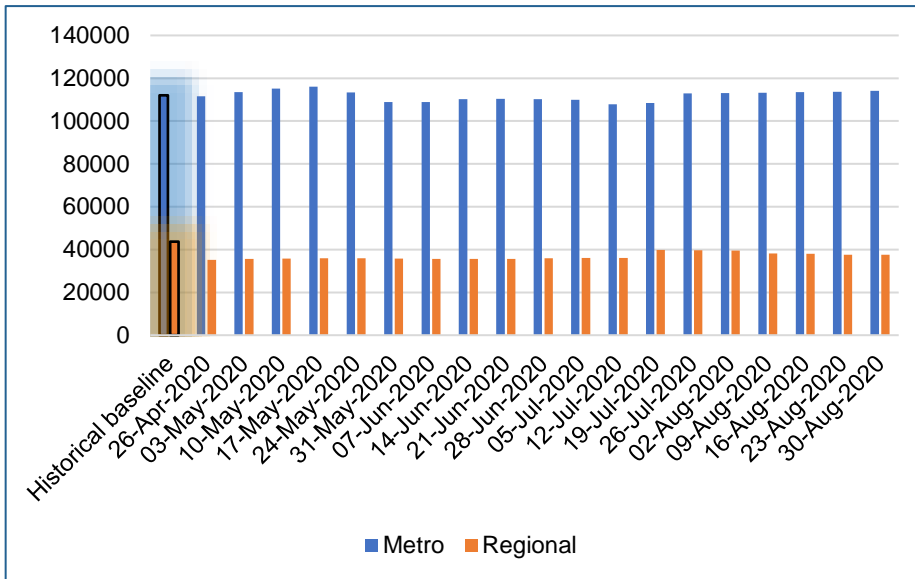
- Weekly applications for state government utility relief grants peaked at 650 in late June before dropping to 430 by mid-July, but have steadily increased since then to a new high of 714 for the last week of August. This is over four times the historical average of about 175 grant applications per week.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly rate is over five times the historical average.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly rate is almost double the historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week



- The weekly number of customers awarded hardship grants by their water business fluctuates, but has mostly hovered around 500 to 600.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average has been around 140 grants, lower than the historical weekly average of 170 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average has been almost 400 grants, more than five times the historical weekly average of 75 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week



- The number of customers on payment instalment plans remains reasonably steady at 151,714 at the end of August. This is only slightly higher than the historical average of about 147,000 customers.

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 [here](#).

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.