

Water customer protections strengthened to provide greater support during pandemic

Victorian households and small businesses who are having trouble paying their water bills due to the coronavirus pandemic now have access to greater customer protections.

With the number of customers on the water businesses' hardship programs increasing by around 2,200 since April, bringing the total to around 22,000, the Essential Services Commission has [updated its customer service codes](#) in line with [new principles](#) developed by the National Cabinet.

The commission's director of pricing Marcus Crudden says Victoria's water businesses have responded well to the circumstances facing their customers providing a range of flexible payment options and access to hardship assistance.

'The new rules will ensure consistency and provide greater clarity on the help that is available, including support for small businesses and halting debt recovery.

The new rules will be in place for as long as they are needed to help manage the effects of the pandemic on customers but will be reviewed by the end of the year, he said.

Mr Crudden says while no customers have had their water supply restricted* for non-payment during the pandemic, there has also been a marked increase in households applying for government assistance grants.

"The number of metropolitan customers applying for utility relief grants administered by the Department of Health and Human Services has increased significantly from a pre-pandemic average of 116 per week to 468 last week.

"Since the end of April, the weekly average number of applications has consistently been two to four times higher and doesn't show any signs of slowing down," he said.

The commission has also released a [new guide](#) designed to ensure customers with a cognitive disability get information in an accessible and effective way.

Developed in partnership with Melbourne Social Equity Institute, the guide aims to ensure customers get clear, accessible and transparent information so they know what help is available and how to go about getting it.

*water cannot be entirely disconnected but supply may be reduced to a low flow for drinking or very basic use.

For further information call: Michelle Bryne, Head of Strategic Communication 0437 677 385

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