

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 3 July 2022

Moving to quarterly reporting

Since April 2020, we have collected and reported on the following subset of data on the support provided to customers to track the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on water customers across Victoria.

Given the changing nature of the pandemic, the lifting of a large majority of the coronavirus restrictions in 2022, and the consistency in the trends we have observed in the data for a sustained period, we will be shifting our reporting on this data from monthly to quarterly.

The following report covering data to 3 July 2022 will be the last monthly instalment of this reporting. The first quarterly report will cover data from the months of July, August and September, and will be released in October this year.

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.

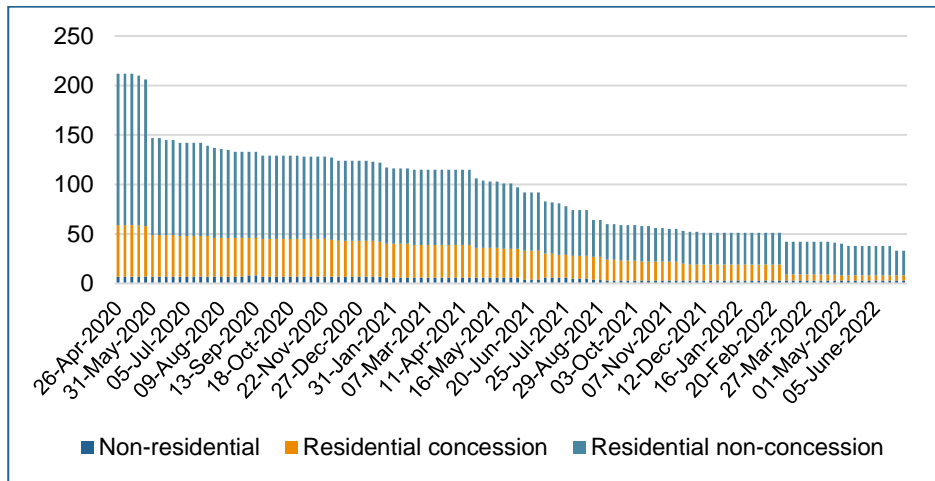
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government utility relief grants during June compared to May.** The average weekly application rate was 711 in June, up from 634 in May. In the past month there was a peak of 777 weekly applications. In metropolitan Victoria the average weekly application rate rose to 540 in June, up from 464 in May.
- **The weekly number of customers awarded hardship grants increased in June compared to May.** On average 260 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in June. This was 34 more than the May average of 226 per week. In regional Victoria, the June weekly average was 258 grants, eight more than the May weekly average of 250. This is almost four times the regional pre-pandemic norm (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The total number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs increased by 88 from 22,269 at the end of May to 22,357 at the end of June.** The number of regional customers on water business hardship programs decreased by 85 from 6,044 at the end of May to 5,959 at the end of June.
- **Water businesses have generally stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills since at least late April 2020.** At the end of June, 33 customers across the state currently have their water supply restricted, five fewer than the number reported at the end of May.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place increased slightly by 592 in June, to 150,133 at the end of the month.**

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

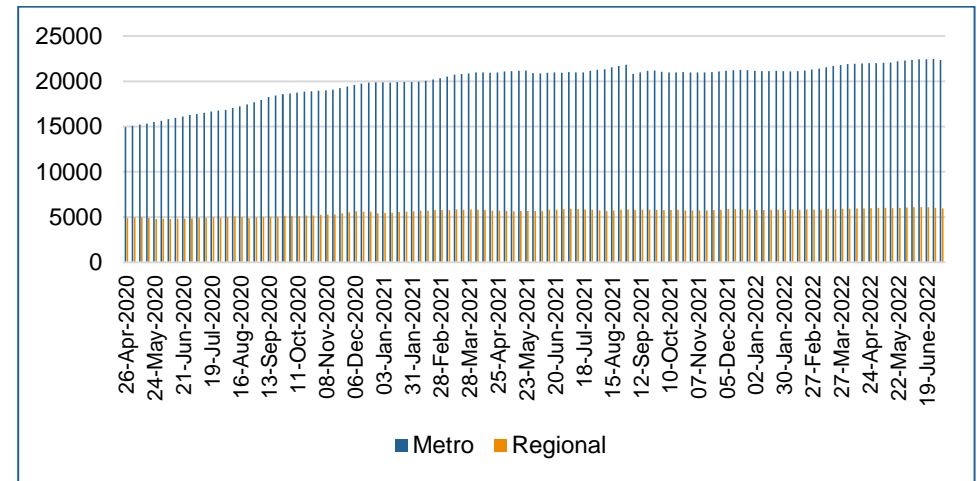
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 33 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of June, five fewer customers than reported at the end of May.
- One regional water retailer lifted one restriction on a residential non-concession customer in the month of June, while a metropolitan retailer lifted four.
- 25 residential non-concession customers, 5 residential concession customers and 3 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

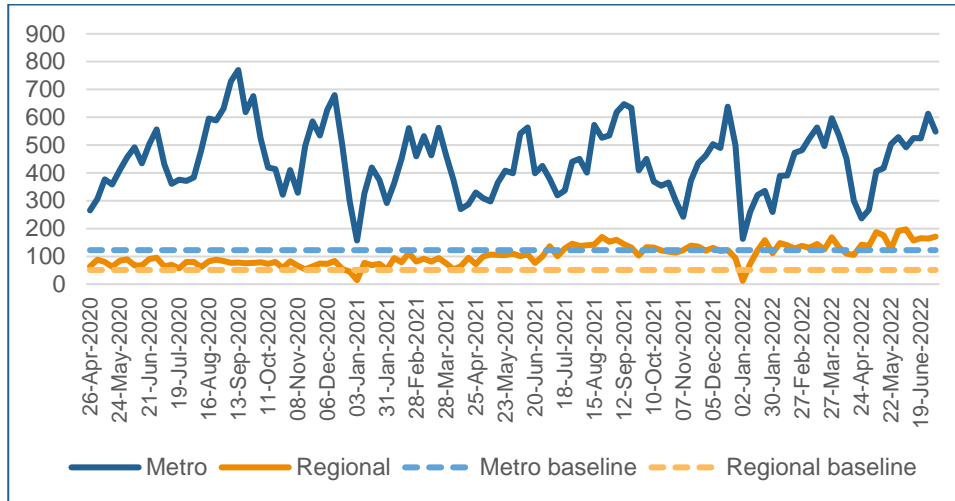
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased by just three in June, bringing the total to 28,316 at the end of the month. 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 88 customers (0.4 per cent) from 22,269 at the end of May to 22,357 at the end of June. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of June was 5,959, a decrease of 85 from the end of May when there were 6,044 regional customers on hardship programs.
- On average, 424 customers entered and 425 exited water business hardship programs each week in June.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

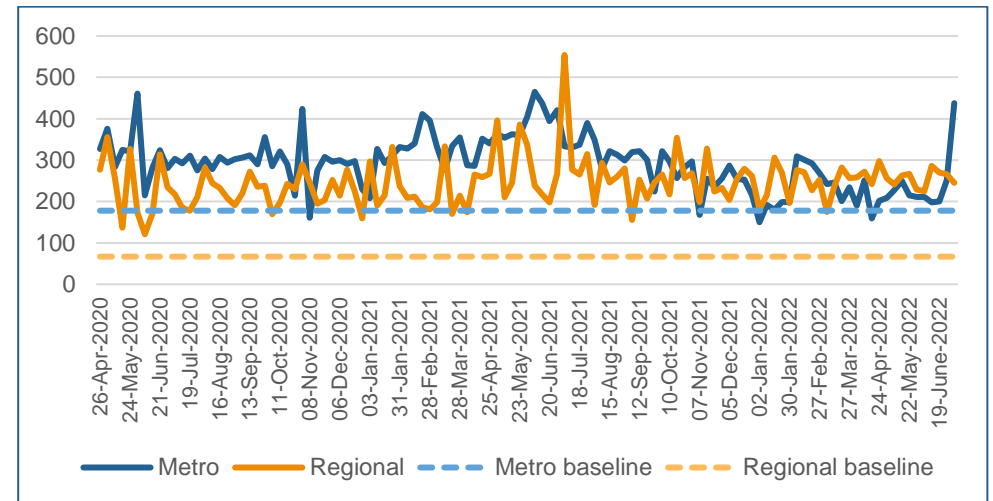
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in June was 711, an increase on the May average of 634. In the past month there was a peak of 777 weekly applications and a low of 682.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for June was 540, a 16 per cent increase on the May average of 464 and almost four and a half times the pre-pandemic baseline. 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 increased from 170 in May, to 171 in June. This is over three times the pre-pandemic historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

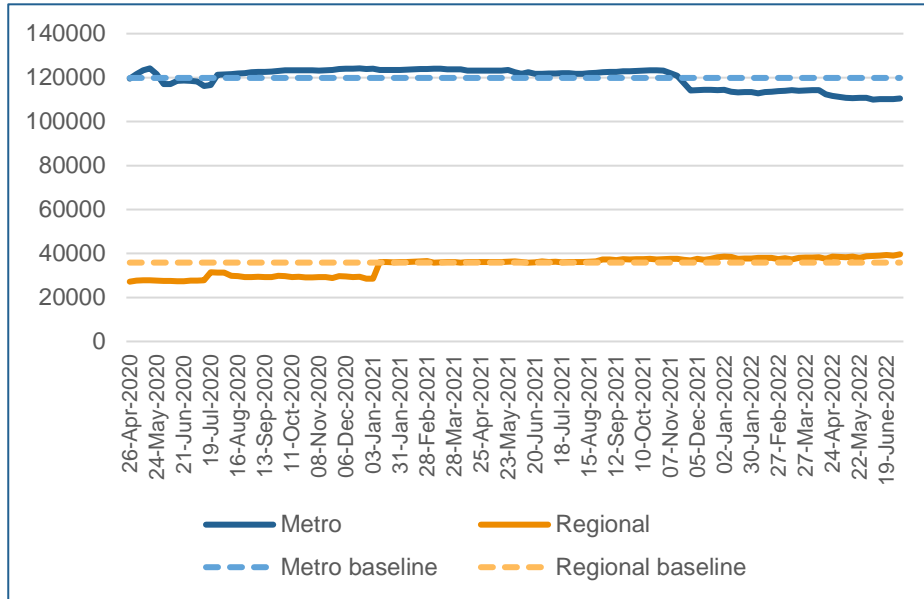
Past month (industry total):



- The June weekly average of 518 customers awarded hardship grants is higher than the May weekly average of 476 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for June was 260 grants, 34 more than the May weekly average, and 46 per cent higher than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants.
- The spike in the number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants in the last reporting week was caused by one metropolitan retailer awarding 263 grants, as it reaches out to customers experiencing domestic violence to ensure they are receiving available support.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for June was 258 grants, eight more than the May weekly average and almost four times more than 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 150,133 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of June, a slight increase of 592 (0.4 per cent) compared to the end of May.

Data notes

- Water restrictions – Lower Murray Water corrected a reporting error in the week ending 6 March 2022. It had previously reported eight residential non-concession customers had their water supply restricted, it has updated this figure to nine. Lower Murray Water have not applied any new restrictions since we began reporting on reporting on this indicator in April 2020.
- Payment instalment plans – North East Water could not provide data for this indicator for the week ending 17 October 2021, so we have used an estimate based on the data it provided for the weeks ending 10 October 2021, 24 October 2021, and 31 October 2021.
- Hardship programs – Coliban Water could not provide data for this indicator for the week ending 12 September 2021 so we have used an estimate based on the data it has provided for the weeks ending 5 September 2021, 19 September 2021, 26 September 2021 and 3 October 2021.
- Hardship programs – Note Yarra Valley Water could not provide data for this indicator for the week ending 3 May 2020 so we have used an estimate based on the data provided for the weeks ending 26 April 2020 and 10 May 2020.
- Hardship programs – Coliban Water provided incorrect hardship programs data in at least three reporting weeks over the reporting period. Coliban was unable to correct its past data since it is captured at a point in time but has changed its processes in December to ensure data is correct.
- Payment instalment plans – Coliban Water could not provide data for this indicator for the week ending 12 September 2021 so we have used an estimate based on the data it has provided for the weeks ending 5 September 2021, 19 September 2021, 26 September 2021 and 3 October 2021.
- Payment instalment plans – Gippsland Water informed us it has likely been underreporting on this indicator prior to the week ending 10 January 2021 and these past numbers cannot be corrected.
- Payment instalment plans – Note Lower Murray Water could not provide data for this indicator for the week ending 17 January 2021, so we have used its last reported number on this indicator from the week ending 10 January 2021.
- Payment instalment plans – Note Gippsland Water could not provide data for this indicator for the weeks ending 11 October 2020 and 18 October 2020 so we have used its last reported number on this indicator from the week ending 4 October 2020.
- Payment instalment plans – Note Yarra Valley Water could not provide data for this indicator for the week ending 3 May 2020 so we have used an estimate based on the data provided for the weeks ending 26 April 2020 and 10 May 2020. North East Water could not provide data on this indicator for the week ending 26 April 2020 so we have used an estimate based on following weeks data up to 24 May 2020.
- Payment instalment plans – Starting with the report dated 31 July 2020, City West Water made an adjustment to its calculations for this indicator, reporting 4,900 more customers on instalment plans. City West Water was unable to provide corrections for previous week's data on this indicator and therefore the past numbers reported are likely underreported.
- Payment instalment plans – Greater Western Water (previously City West Water area) has not provided data for this indicator for the week ending 26 December 2021 due to staffing shortages. We used an estimate based on the average for week ending 19 December 2021 and 02 January 2022.
- Payment instalment plans – Greater Western Water (previously Western Water area) has not provided data for this indicator for the week ending 9 January 2022. We used an estimate based on the average from week ending 16 January 2022 to 30 January 2022.
- Payment instalment plans – Greater Western Water (previously Western Water area) has not provided data for this indicator for the week ending 20 February 2022. We used an estimate based on their average from the weeks ending 6, 13 and 27 of February.
- Payment extensions – City West Water has provided data for this indicator from the week ending 11 October 2020, which is now included in our report. Data presented in our graph for payment extensions prior to the week ending 11 October 2020 includes data from Barwon Water, South East Water, Western Water and Yarra Valley Water only.

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.