

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 3 October 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.

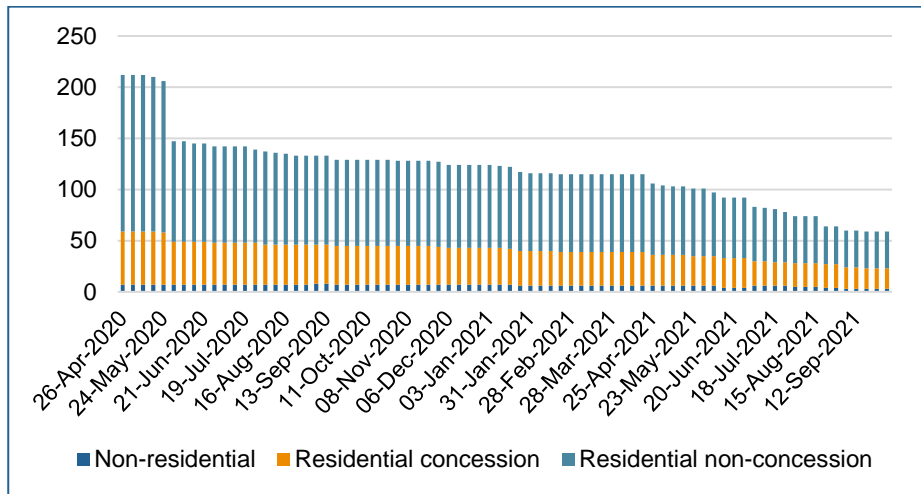
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during September compared to August.** The average weekly application rate was 686 in September, up from 660 in August. In the past month there was a peak of 790 weekly applications and a low of 512 applications. The average weekly application rate in regional Victoria decreased to 134 in September from 151 in August.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants decreased in September compared to August.** On average 298 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in September. This was 5 fewer than the August average of 303 but still 120 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 September weekly average was 225 grants, 45 fewer than the August weekly average. This level is over three times the pre-pandemic norm (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs decreased by 768 (3.5 per cent) from 21,815 at the end of August to 21,047 at the end of September.** There was also a decrease of 73 customers in regional Victoria, where the figure at the end of September was 5,778 compared to 5,851 at the end of August (a 1.2 per cent decrease).
- **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 September, 59 customers across the state currently have their supply restricted, five fewer than at the end of August.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place has increased by 645 in September, to 160,332 at the end of the month.**

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

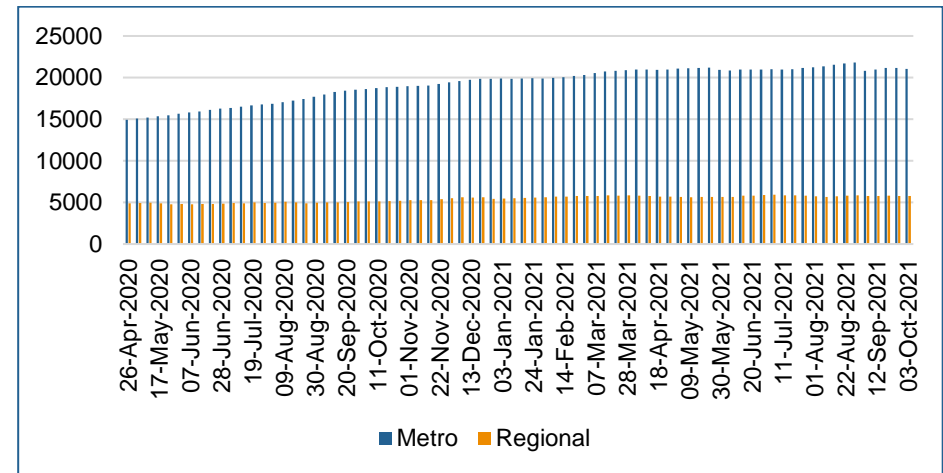
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 59 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of September, a decrease of five since the end of August.
- 36 residential non-concession customers, 20 residential concession customers and 3 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

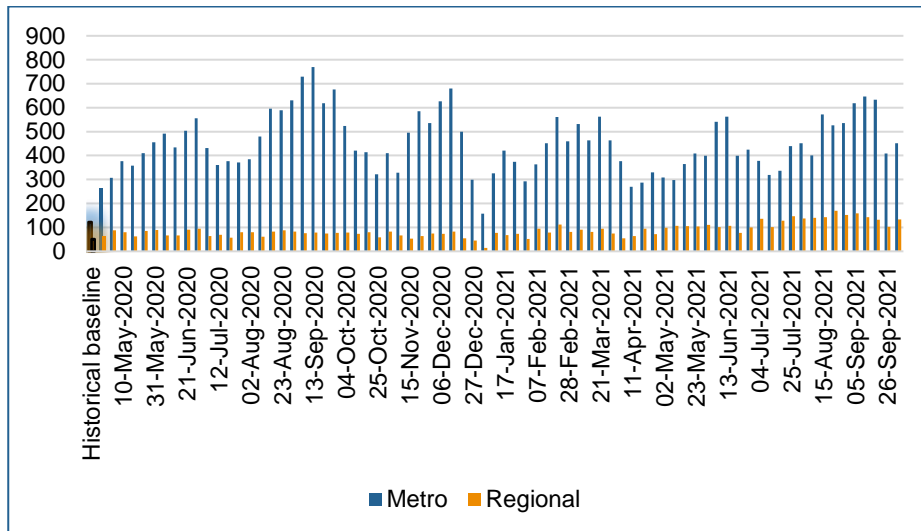
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs decreased by 841 (3.0 per cent) in September, bringing the total to 26,825. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers. One water business largely drove this decrease, with a decrease of 1,001 customers in the total number of customers in its hardship program.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs decreased by 768 customers (3.5 per cent) from 21,815 at the end of August to 21,047 at the end of September. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of September was 5,778. This is 73 (1.2 per cent) fewer customers than at the end of August.
- On average, 490 customers entered and 658 exited water business hardship programs each week in September.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

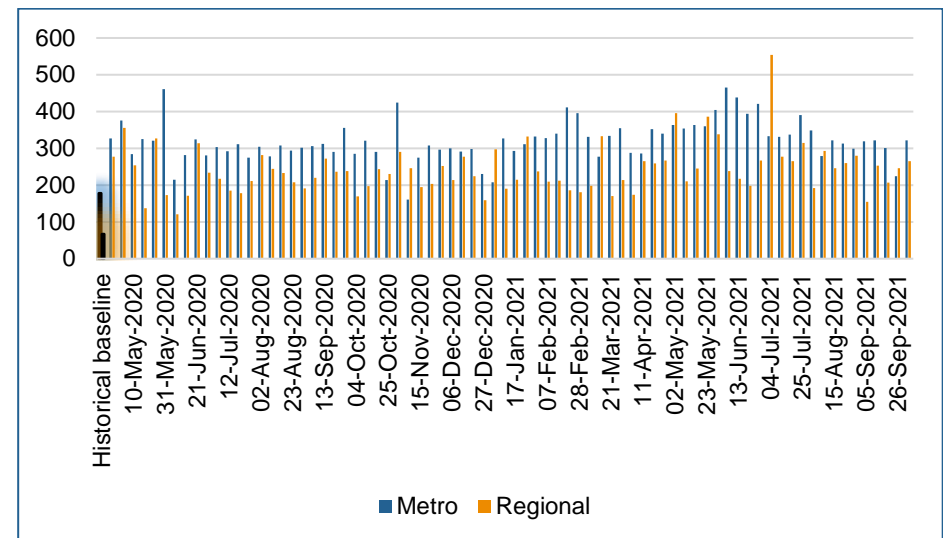
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in September was 686, an increase on the August average of 660. In the past month there was a peak of 790 weekly applications and a low of 512 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for September was 552, over four times pre-pandemic the historical average. 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 decreased to 134 in September, from 151 in August.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

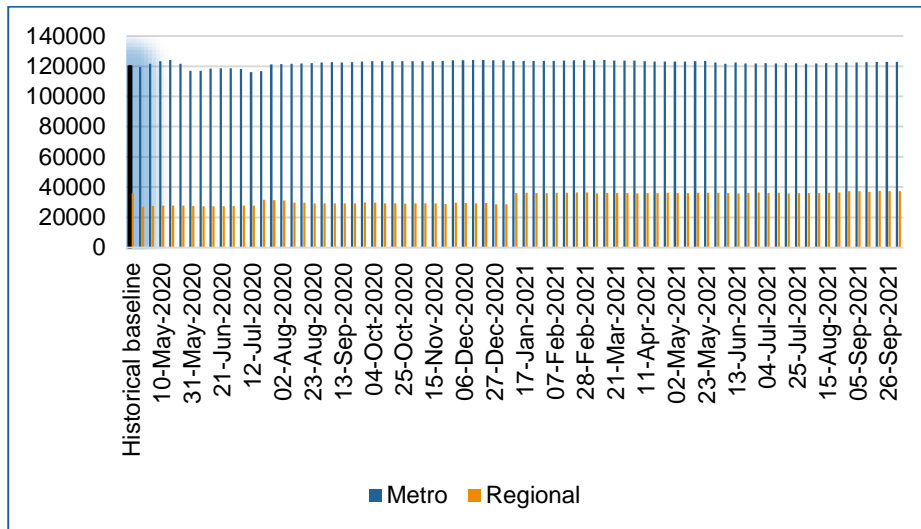
Past month (industry total):



- The September weekly average of 523 customers awarded hardship grants is lower than the August weekly average of 573 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for September was 298 grants, 5 fewer than the August weekly average, but 120 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 September was 225 grants, 45 fewer than the August weekly average, but still over three times 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 160,332 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of September, an increase of 645 (0.4 per cent) compared to the end of August.

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.