

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 25 October 2020

The commission sent voluntary data requests to all retailers to monitor the number of energy customers receiving assistance to pay their bills. The following provides our observations on the data reported to the commission to date.

About the data

Weekly data is reported by retailers on a voluntary basis and is not audited by the commission. This data consists of a subset of the measures included in our annual performance report.

During the week ending 25 October 2020, we received submissions from 17 retailers covering 92 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There was one completed electricity small business disconnection for non-payment on 14 October.
- The average number of residential and small business customers who contacted their retailers for assistance peaked in May and has been steadily decreasing in recent months – and the weekly average in October has been the lowest recorded to date.
- The number of residential customers receiving tailored assistance have been increasing in recent months. However, we note that:
 - although the number of customers who cannot pay for their on-going usage continues to decrease, their average arrears has been increasing and is currently the highest since April
 - the number of customers who can pay for their on-going usage has been increasing since August and their average arrears is currently the highest since April
- The number of small business customers on payment assistance continue to increase in recent weeks. The average arrears for gas small business customers is the highest since April.
- The number of customers who deferred their payments and their average amount outstanding have been decreasing since the week ending 23 August due to significant decreases from one retailer. There was an increase in the average amount deferred for gas small business customers at the end of September before decreasing towards the end of October.

- The total number of other residential and small business customers with arrears (excluding those receiving payment assistance and deferrals) has gradually increased since mid-July. Their average arrears continue to be higher than the figures in July.
- The average number of missed bill payments for electricity customers has been lower since the peak in May for residential and in July for small business. However, the average number of gas missed bill payments for residential customers is at its highest in October.
- Electricity distributors continued its network relief package to retailers, which allows retailers to defer the payment of network charges and payment deferrals during the pandemic. Eligible retailers applied to defer their network charges payments for September 2020 and received total payment deferrals of \$101,402 for 1,639 residential customers and \$2,377 for 10 small business customers.

Victorian-wide data summary¹

Electricity

Indicator	Electricity							
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct
Residential customers – assistance and arrears								
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	34,517 1.3%	31,911 1.2%	30,921 1.2%	30,495 1.1%	31,591 1.2%	33,515 1.3%	35,668 1.3%	35,955 1.4%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	21,817 0.8%	21,017 0.8%	19,268 0.7%	18,612 0.7%	18,357 0.7%	17,896 0.7%	17,781 0.7%	16,385 0.6%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$625 -	\$618 -1%	\$652 +6%	\$641 -2%	\$660 +3%	\$687 +4%	\$682 -1%	\$691 +1%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,402 -	\$1,385 -1%	\$1,547 +12%	\$1,529 -1%	\$1,515 -1%	\$1,509 -0%	\$1,524 +1%	\$1,588 +4%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears								
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	2,278 0.8%	2,471 0.9%	2,618 0.9%	2,614 0.9%	2,547 0.9%	2,527 0.9%	2,631 0.9%	2,485 0.9%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,241 -	\$1,180 -5%	\$1,141 -3%	\$1,327 +16%	\$1,463 +10%	\$1,542 +5%	\$1,570 +2%	\$1,534 -2%

¹ These figures can change over time as retailers submit updated data. Some weeks have missing data from retailers. This can affect monthly totals as well as comparisons to other time periods. Note that average arrears are calculated by estimating total arrears divided by the number of customers receiving assistance across the market (reported data only).

Indicator	Electricity							
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct
Customers who deferred payments								
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	8,577	8,848	5,105	3,763	2,968
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$610	\$639	\$628	\$530	\$477
	-	-	-	-	+5%	-2%	-16%	-10%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	2,310	2,269	1,364	439	334
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$2,461	\$2,604	\$2,118	\$1,150	\$1,483
	-	-	-	-	+6%	-19%	-46%	+29%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)²								
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	268,021	271,930	275,652	277,418
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$455	\$485	\$507	\$510
	-	-	-	-	-	+6%	+5%	+1%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	50,787	52,833	54,774	54,035
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$885	\$969	\$980	\$871
	-	-	-	-	-	+10%	+1%	-11%

² This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Electricity						
	April (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May (27 Apr to 31 May)	June (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	July (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	August (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	September (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	October (28 Sep to 25 Oct)
Calls waiting times							
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	111 seconds	75 seconds	89 seconds	80 seconds	95 seconds	75 seconds	53 seconds
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ³							
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	90,765	98,783	104,794	103,367	98,573	99,109	79,704
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	6,298	7,134	5,762	5,298	5,022	3,931	3,226
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	1,738	2,332	1,371	633	623	326	196
Missed bills (market-wide)							
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	38,535	43,768	46,797	47,137	44,067	44,778	43,423
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,192	9,548	8,173	8,576	8,923	8,336	8,208

³ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.

Gas

Indicator	Gas							
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct
Residential customers – assistance and arrears								
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	24,547 1.2%	22,125 1.1%	20,542 1.0%	21,030 1.0%	23,315 1.1%	28,133 1.4%	31,682 1.6%	33,844 1.7%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	16,346 0.8%	15,606 0.8%	14,108 0.7%	13,588 0.7%	13,893 0.7%	13,706 0.7%	14,060 0.7%	13,138 0.6%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$512 -	\$498 -3%	\$489 -2%	\$474 -3%	\$496 +5%	\$532 +7%	\$541 +2%	\$557 +3%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,108 -	\$1,092 -1%	\$1,141 +4%	\$1,138 -0%	\$1,157 +2%	\$1,215 +5%	\$1,243 +2%	\$1,309 +5%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears								
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	656 1.0%	696 1.1%	687 1.1%	700 1.1%	746 1.2%	723 1.1%	821 1.3%	773 1.2%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,164 -	\$1,139 -2%	\$1,436 +26%	\$1,648 +15%	\$1,478 -10%	\$1,681 +14%	\$1,815 +8%	\$2,119 +17%
Customers who deferred payments								
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	7,072	7,594	4,919	3,147	2,520
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$442 -	\$497 +12%	\$507 +2%	\$459 -9%	\$414 -10%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	908	933	515	236	135

Indicator	Gas							
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$1,623	\$1,813	\$1,962	\$2,659	\$1,394
	-	-	-	-	+12%	+8%	+36%	-48%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁴								
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	208,688	220,345	224,481	228,486
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$368	\$420	\$436	\$435
	-	-	-	-	-	+14%	+4%	-0%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	9,657	10,105	9,798	9,409
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$1,237	\$1,388	\$1,540	\$1,554
	-	-	-	-	-	+12%	+11%	+1%

⁴ This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Gas						
	April (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May (27 Apr to 31 May)	June (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	July (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	August (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	September (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	October (28 Sep to 25 Oct)
Calls waiting times							
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	<i>Refer to electricity</i>						
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁵							
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	<i>Refer to electricity</i>						
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	4,064	4,656	4,224	4,035	3,763	2,983	2,483
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	265	257	189	121	96	62	51
Missed bills (market-wide)							
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	27,432	28,085	32,264	32,244	32,603	33,302	33,396
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,876	1,905	1,703	1,740	1,822	1,968	1,727

⁵ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.