

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 04 October 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

- **Victoria's water businesses continue to provide additional support to customers during the pandemic.** Water businesses have been proactive in reaching out to customers, including small business and other non-residential customers, to ensure they are aware of existing support programs as well as new support measures developed in response to the pandemic.
- **We met with water business leaders to discuss the ongoing impacts of the pandemic.** Our commissioners and water team management recently heard from senior leaders from Victoria's water businesses, who reported that they had increased support available for customers, and are looking to the role they may play in the state's economic recovery.
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs continues to steadily increase, rising by over five per cent this month from 17,270 at the end of August to 18,195 at the end of September.** In regional areas, the number has continued to fluctuate from week to week, and was 5,583 at the end of September.
- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during September compared to August.** The average weekly application rate was 775 during September, up from 653 in August. A new weekly peak of 848 applications was recorded in mid-September, with 755 of these from metropolitan customers. Notably, the statewide weekly rate has dropped to 602 applications at the end of September.
- **More customers received hardship grants from their water business during September, especially in regional Victoria, compared to the end of August.** The September weekly average of 558 customers awarded hardship grants was 8 per cent higher than August's average of 515. While the number of customers awarded hardship grants at each business continues to fluctuate week by week, 454 customers received grants in the final week of September, 39 fewer than the last week of August.

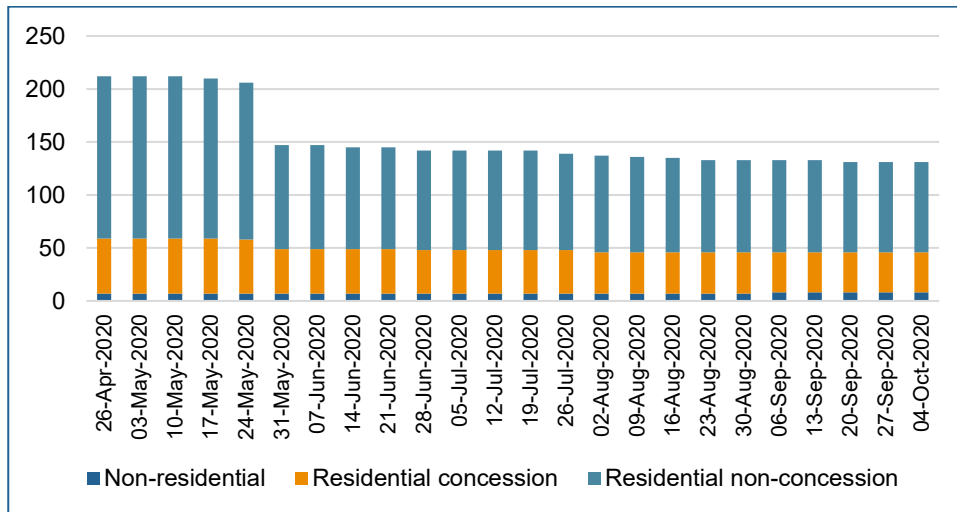
- **Water businesses have generally stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills since at least late April.** Since the last week in August, three supply restrictions have been lifted while one has been applied to a non-residential customer. At the end of September, 131 customers still have their supply restricted across the state.

Our codes now include the national principles for hardship support

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


Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

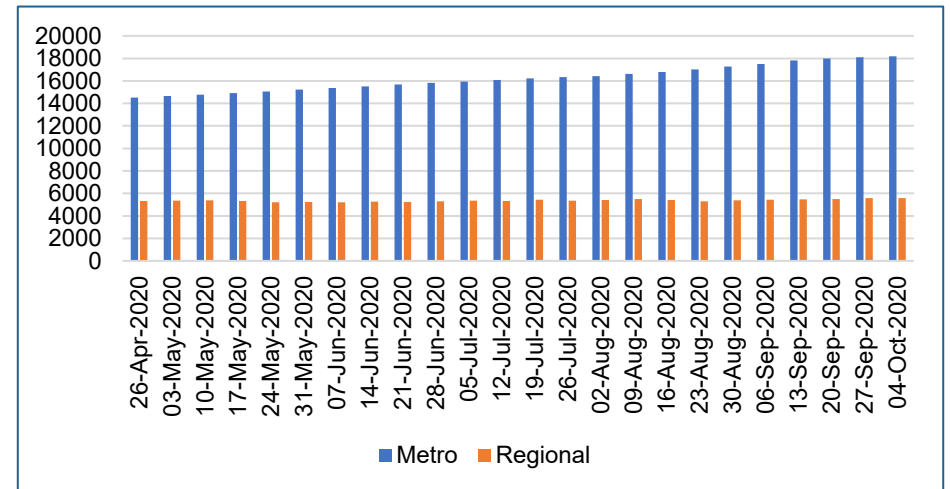
Past month (industry total): 



- A total of 131 customers had water supply restrictors in place at the end of August, a decrease compared with the 133 in place at the end of September and 212 in April when weekly reporting commenced.
- 85 residential non-concession customers, 38 residential concession customers and 8 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.
- One new restriction was applied by a water business on a non-residential customer in the past month due to an ongoing non-payment issue.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

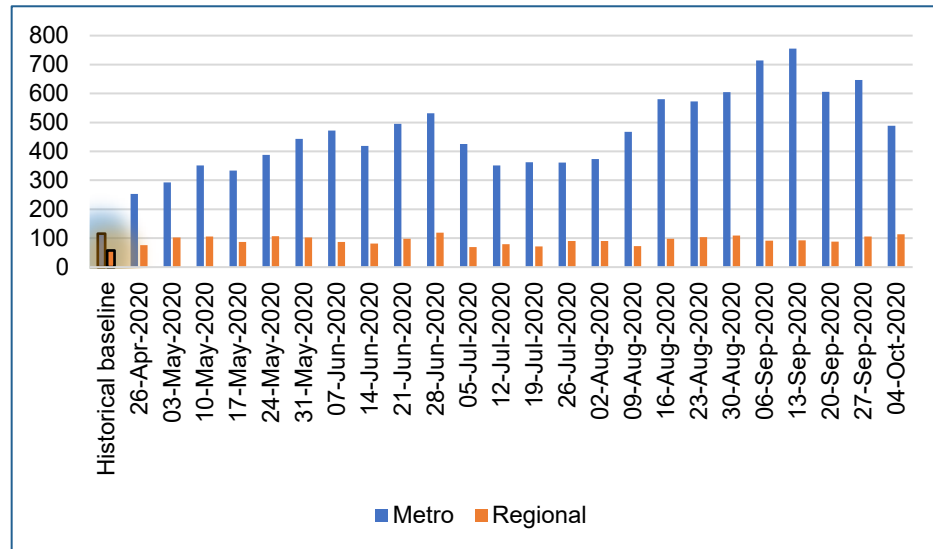
Past month (industry total): 



- The total number of customers in hardship programs has risen by 1123 (5.0 per cent) since the end of August, bringing the total to 23,778 (this is about 0.8 per cent of Victoria's over 2.8 million water customers).
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs continues to increase steadily, rising from 17,270 at the end of August to 18,195, an increase of 925 (5.4 per cent).
- In regional areas the number was 5,385 at the end of August but has risen to 5,583 (3.7 per cent) by the end of September.
- On average, 444 customers have entered and 273 exited water business hardship programs each week. These averages have increased since the end of August.

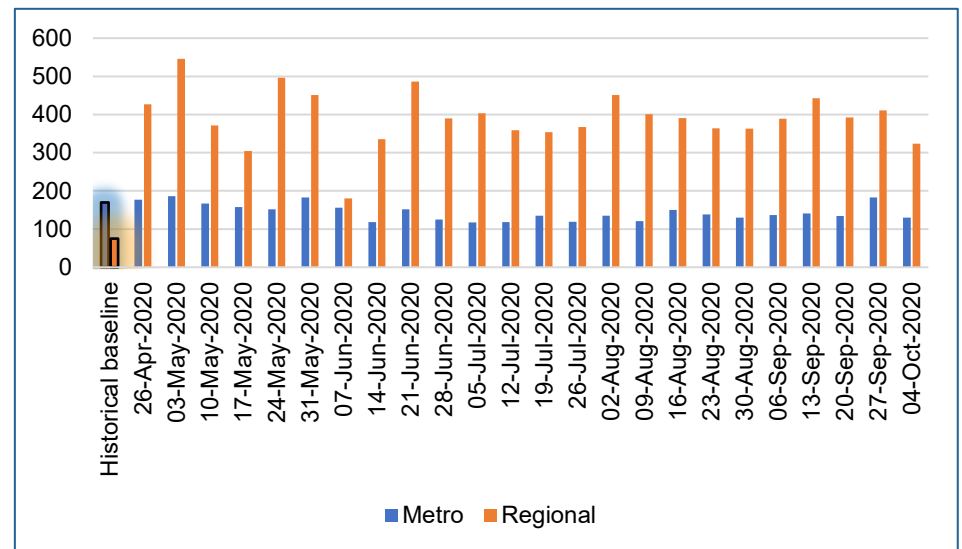
Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

Past month average (industry total):



Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week


Past month average (industry total):

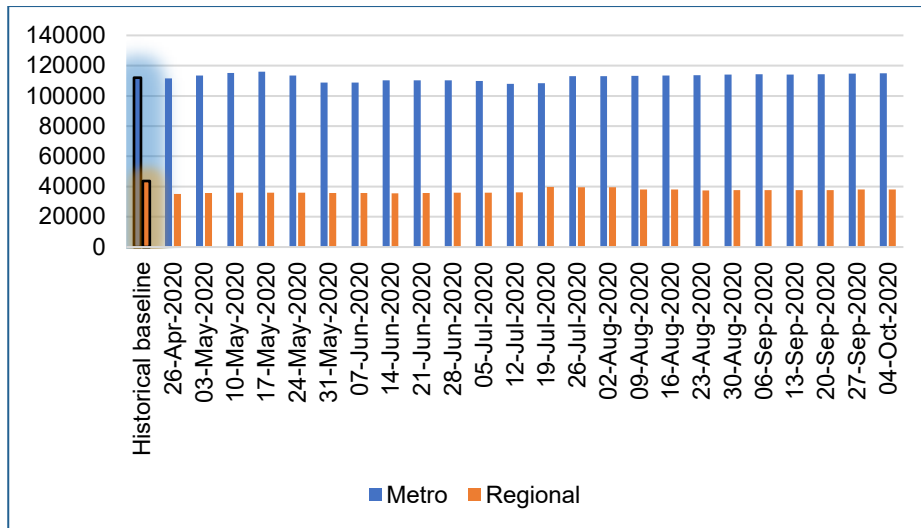


- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in September was 775, well above the average of 653 for August. A new peak of 848 applications was recorded in mid-September, almost five times the historical average of about 175 grant applications per week, before dropping back to 602 at the end of the month.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly rate is over four times the historical average at the end of September.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly rate remains around double the historical average since the end of August.

- The September weekly average of 558 customers awarded hardship grants was 8 per cent higher than August’s average of 515. However, the weekly number has dropped to 454 grants awarded at the end of September.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average at the end of September remains around 140 grants, lower than the historical weekly average of 170 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average at the end of September remains at just under 400 grants, more than five times the historical weekly average of 75 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week

Past month (industry total): 



- The number of customers on payment instalment plans has increased slightly to 152,991 at the end of September. This is 1,277 (0.8 per cent) more than the 151,714 customers on instalment plans at 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 [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.