

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 28 February 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.

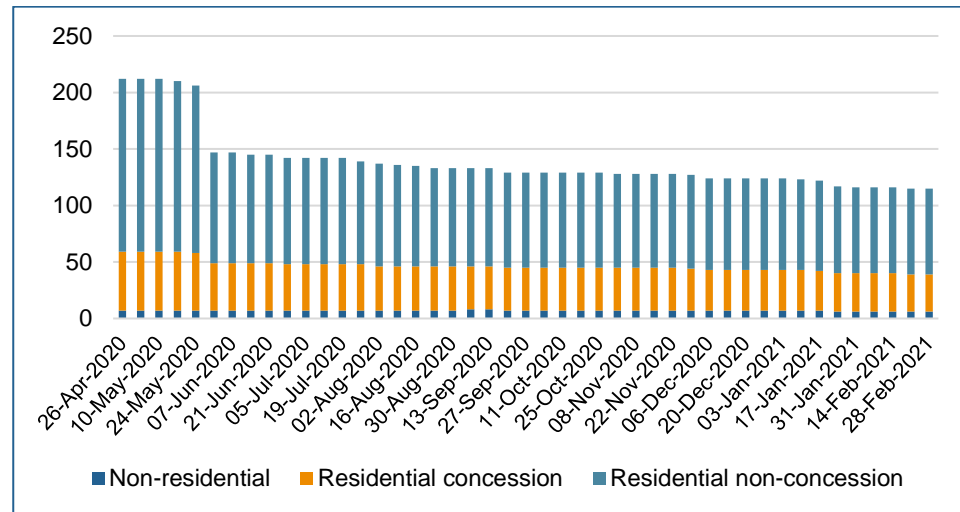
Key Insights

- **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.
- **Customer trust in their water business has slightly declined.** Results from our latest customer survey conducted this month show customer trust in their water business has fallen slightly, after increasing steadily since November 2019. For the remaining measures – value for money, reputation in the community, and overall satisfaction – customer sentiment was unchanged from the previous survey conducted in November 2020. Further details of these results are available on our website at: www.esc.vic.gov.au/how-customers-rate-their-water-business.
- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during February compared to January.** The average weekly application rate was 550 in February, up from 421 in January. In the past month there was a peak of 673 weekly applications and a low of 457 applications.
- **More metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants in February than at any other time.** On average 197 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in February, which is 16 per cent above the pre-pandemic norm (about 170 grants awarded per week) and the highest weekly average since we began reporting in April last year. In regional Victoria the February weekly average was 369, lower than the January weekly average but about five times the pre-pandemic norm (about 75 grants awarded per week).

- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs has increased, rising by 436 (2.2 per cent) from 19,454 at the end of January to 19,890 at the end of February.** In regional areas, the figure at the end of February was 6,209 compared to 6,061 at the end of January.
- **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 February, 115 customers across the state still have their supply restricted.

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

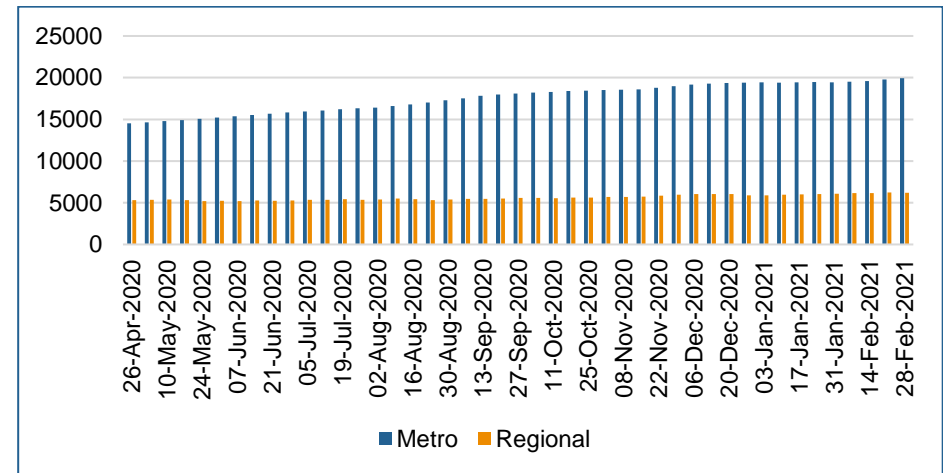
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 115 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of February, decreasing slightly from 116 customers at the end of January. This continues the downward trend since April when weekly reporting started, and the number of restrictions in place was 212.
- 76 residential non-concession customers, 33 residential concession customers and 6 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

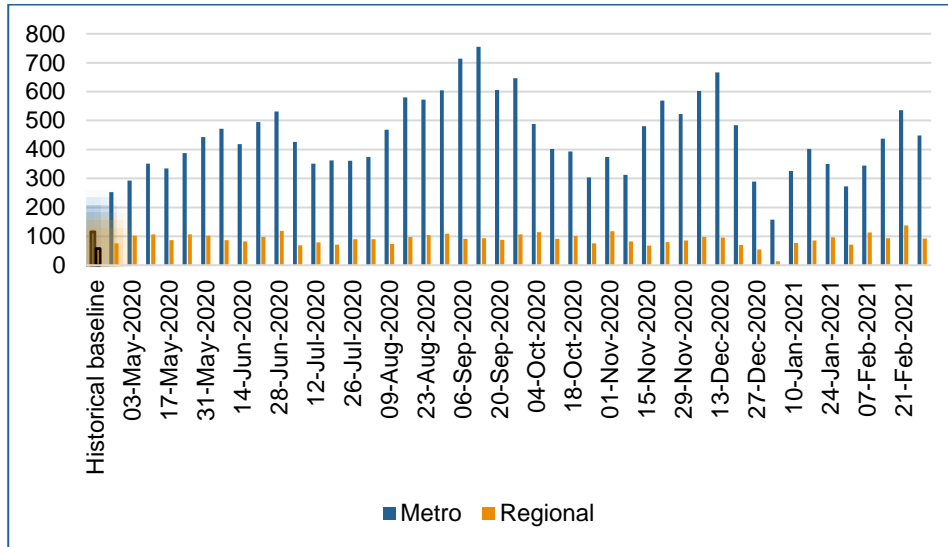
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs rose by 584 (2.3 per cent) in February, bringing the total to 26,099. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs also increased by 436 customers (2.2 per cent) from 19,454 at the end of January to 19,890 at the end of February.
- In regional areas, the number was 6,209 at the end of February, 148 more customers than at the end of January. On average, 430 customers have entered and 287 exited water business hardship programs each week.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

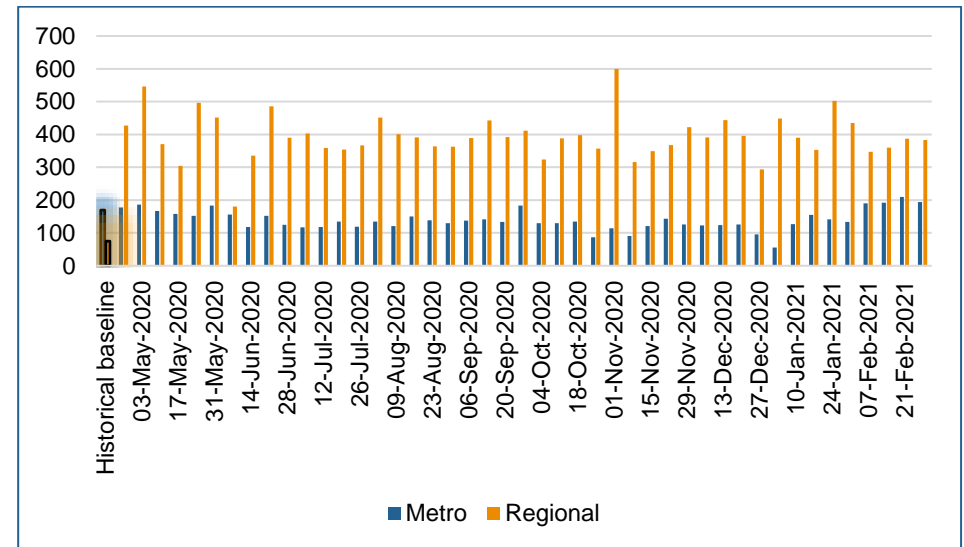
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in February was 550, an increase from the January average of 421. In the past month there was a peak of 673 weekly applications and a low of 457 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for February was about four times the historical average.
- In regional Victoria, the average weekly application rate in February was almost twice the historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

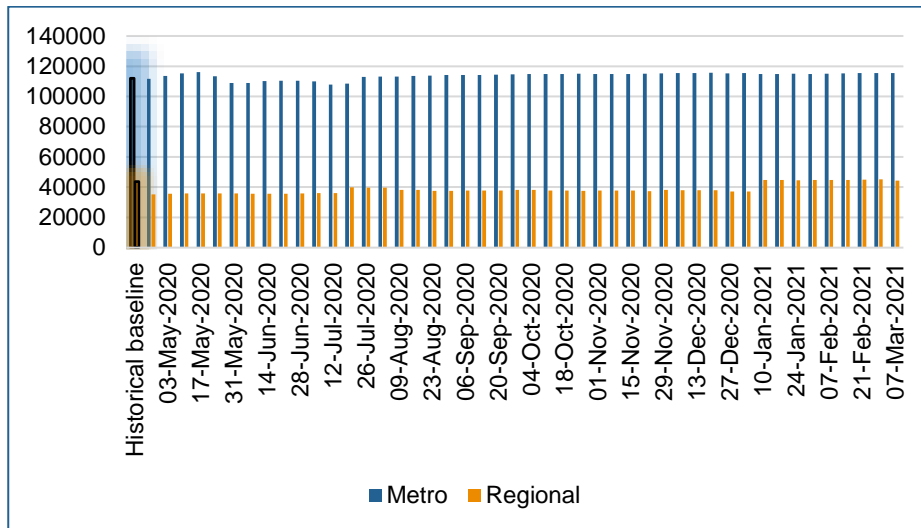
Past month (industry total):



- The February weekly average of 566 customers awarded hardship grants is slightly higher than the January weekly average of 559 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for February was 197 grants, 16 per cent higher than the historical weekly average of 170 grants and the highest weekly average since we began reporting in late April.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for February was 369 grants, 51 fewer grants than the January weekly average, but about five times the historical weekly average of 75 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week

Past month (industry total): slightly 



- There were 160,496 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of February, an increase of 945 (0.6 per cent) compared to the end of January.
- Note we applied an update to the regional data from 10 January 2021 after we found some figures had been underreported. This brings the number of regional customers on payment instalment plans about 2 per cent above the pre-pandemic norm (43,639 customers on instalment plans at a point in time). Regional data before 10 January could not be updated.

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.