

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 2 January 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.

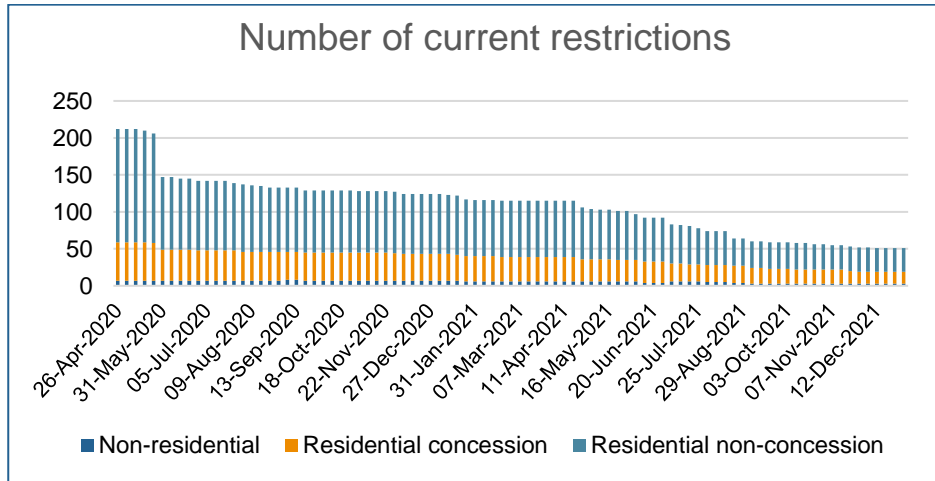
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government utility relief grants during December compared to November.** The average weekly application rate was 554 in December, up from 507 in November. In the past month there was a peak of 760 weekly applications and a seasonal dip of 175 applications in the last week of 2020 over the New Year period. We expect numbers will pick back up again in January as they did last year. In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate increased to 459 in December from 378 in November.
- **The weekly number of customers awarded hardship grants decreased in December compared to November.** On average 232 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in December. This was 3 more than the November average of 229 per week, and 54 more than the pre-pandemic norm of 178. In regional Victoria, the December weekly average was 236 grants, 10 fewer than the November weekly average. This is three and a half times the pre-pandemic norm (about 67 grants awarded per week).
- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs increased by 88 (0.4 per cent) from 21,065 at the end of November to 21,153 at the end of December.** There was a decrease of 29 customers in regional Victoria, where the figure at the end of December was 5,775 compared to 5,804 at the end of November (a 0.5 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 2020.** At the end of December, 51 customers across the state currently have their supply restricted, one fewer than at the end of November.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place increased by 1,944 in December, to 152,904 at the end of the month.**


Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

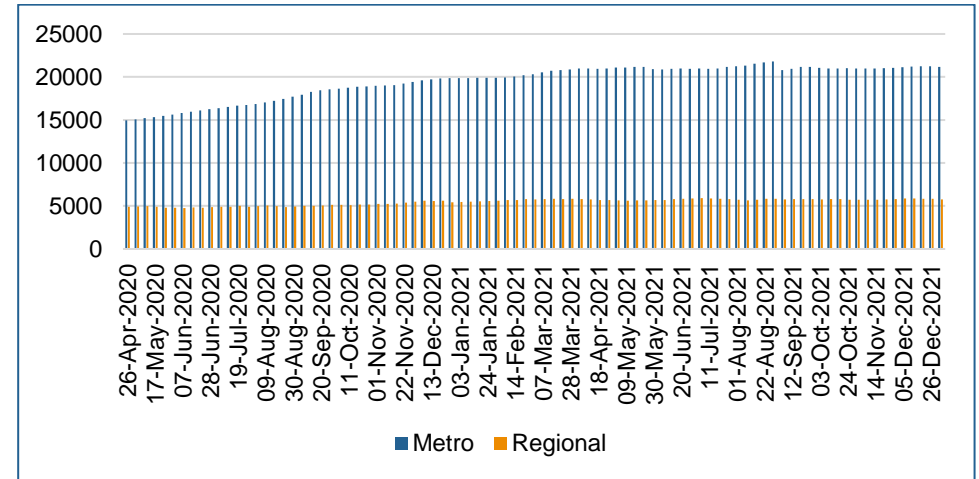
Past month (industry total): 



- A total of 51 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of December, a decrease of one since the end of November.
- 32 residential non-concession customers, 16 residential concession customers and 3 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

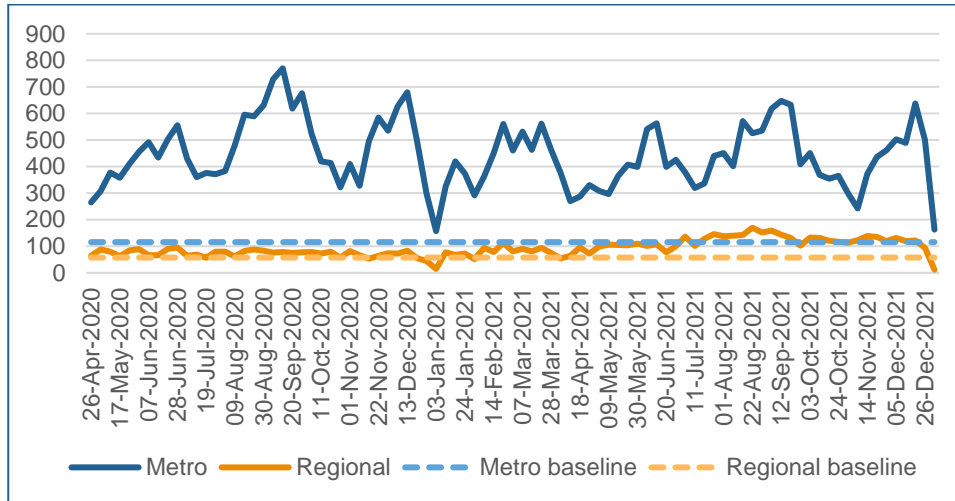
Past month (industry total): 



- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased by 59 (0.2 per cent) in December, bringing the total to 26,928. 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 21,065 at the end of November to 21,153 at the end of December. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of December was 5,775. This is 29 (0.5 per cent decrease) fewer customers than at the end of November.
- On average, 352 customers entered and 340 exited water business hardship programs each week in December.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

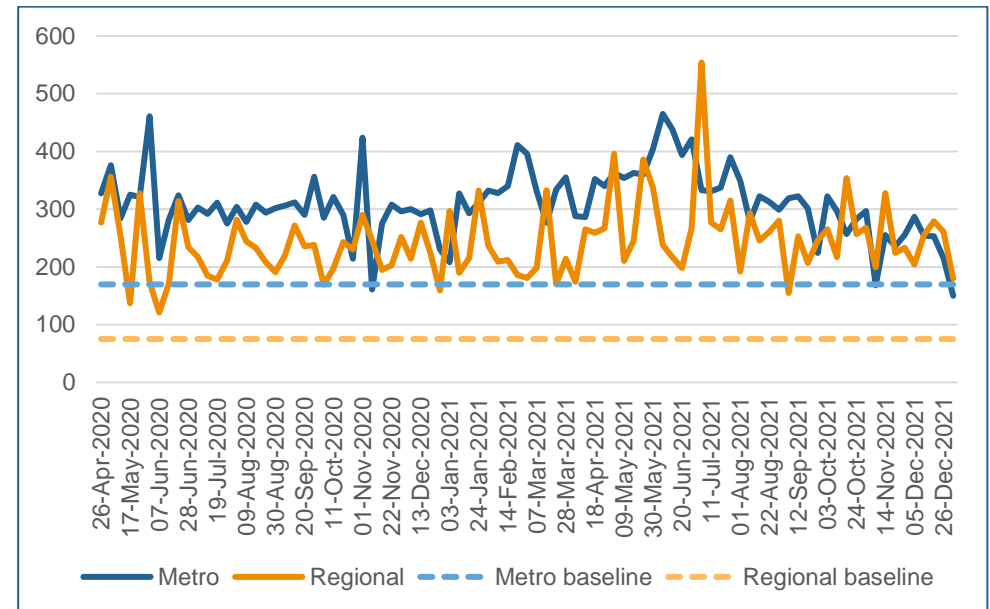
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in December was 554, an increase on the November average of 507. In the past month there was a peak of 760 weekly applications and a seasonal dip of 175 applications, in the last week of the year.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for December was 459, an increase on the November average of 378 and almost four times the pre-pandemic 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 from 129 in November, to 96 in December.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

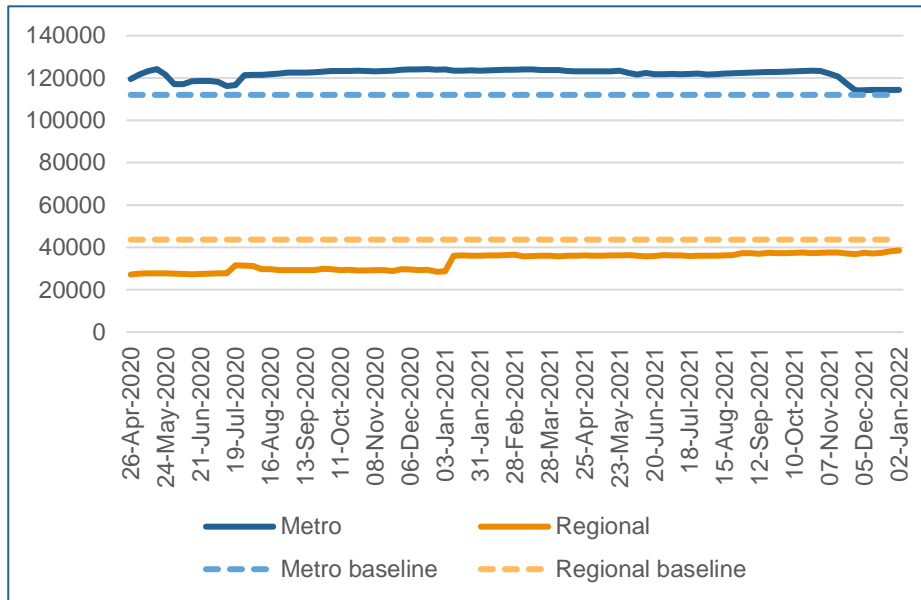
Past month (industry total):



- The December weekly average of 468 customers awarded hardship grants is lower than the November weekly average of 475 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for December was 232 grants, 3 more than the November weekly average, and 54 more than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants, noting a dip below this historical average in the last week of the year, and a general downward trend since a peak of 465 in early June.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for December was 236 grants, 10 fewer than the November weekly average but three and a half 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 152,904 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of December, an increase of 1,944 (1.3 per cent) compared to the end of November.

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.