Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 27 February 2022

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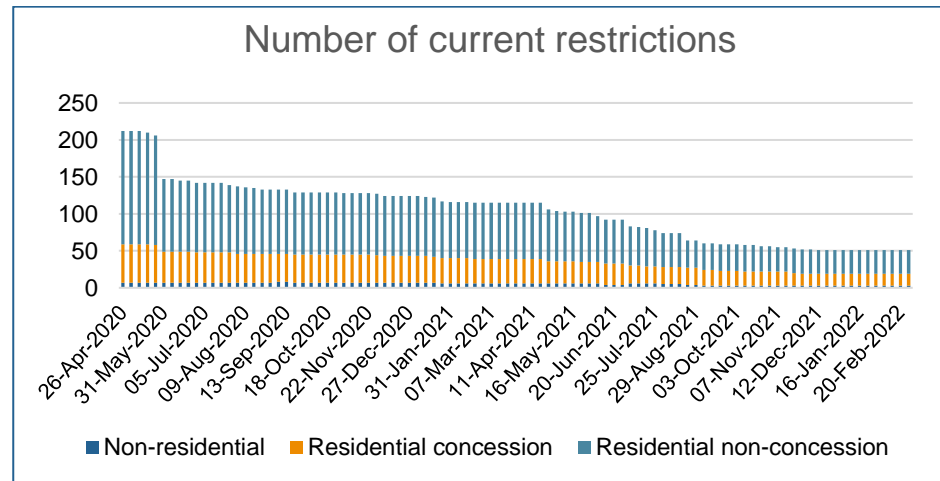
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **More customers applied for government utility relief grants during February compared to January.** The average weekly application rate was 572 in February, up from 409 in January. In the past month there was a peak of 619 weekly applications. In metropolitan Victoria the average weekly application rate rose to 434 in February, up from 294 in January.

- **The weekly number of customers awarded hardship grants increased in February compared to January.** On average 293 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in February. This was 100 more than the January average of 193 per week. In regional Victoria, the February weekly average was 257 grants, 10 more than the January weekly average of 247. This is over three and a half times the regional pre-pandemic norm (about 67 grants awarded per week).

- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs increased by 163 (0.8 per cent) from 21,126 at the end of January to 21,289 at the end of February.** There number of regional customers on water business hardship programs increased by 65 (1.1%) from 5,775 at the end of January to 5,840 at the end of February.

- **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 February, 51 customers across the state currently have their water supply restricted, the same number of customers since the week ending 12 December 2021.

- **The number of payment instalment plans in place increased by 53 in February, to 151,169 at the end of the month.**

## Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

Past month (industry total): ⬌

Number of current restrictions

Legend: ■ Non-residential ■ Residential concession ■ Residential non-concession

- A total of 51 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of February, the same number of customers as at the end of January.

- 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): slightly ⬆

Legend: ■ Metro ■ Regional
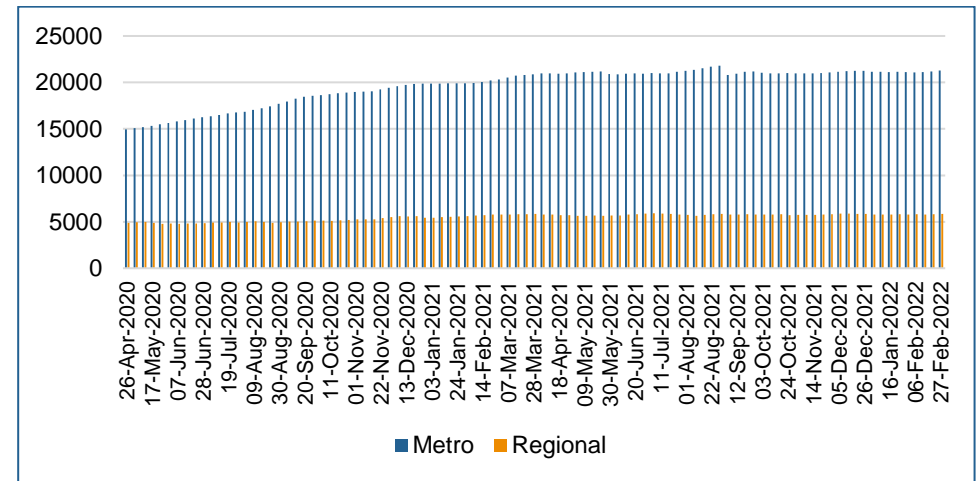
- The total number of customers in hardship programs increased by 228 (0.8 per cent) in February, bringing the total to 27,129 at the end of the month. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.

- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs increased by 163 customers (0.8 per cent) from 21,126 at the end of January to 21,289 at the end of February. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of February was 5,840, an increase of 65 from the end of January when there were 5,775 regional customers on hardship programs.

- On average, 420 customers entered and 363 exited water business hardship programs each week in February.

## Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

Past month (industry total):
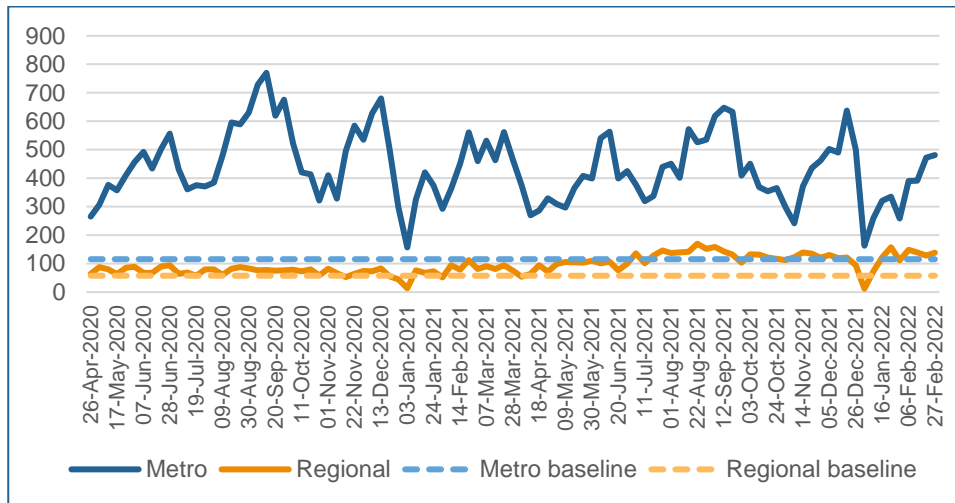
- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in February was 572, an increase on the January average of 409. In the past month there was a peak of 619 weekly applications and a low of 531.

- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for February was 434, an increase on the January average of 294 and just over three and a half times the pre-pandemic baseline. 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 increased from 116 in January, to 139 in February. This is over double the pre-pandemic historical average.

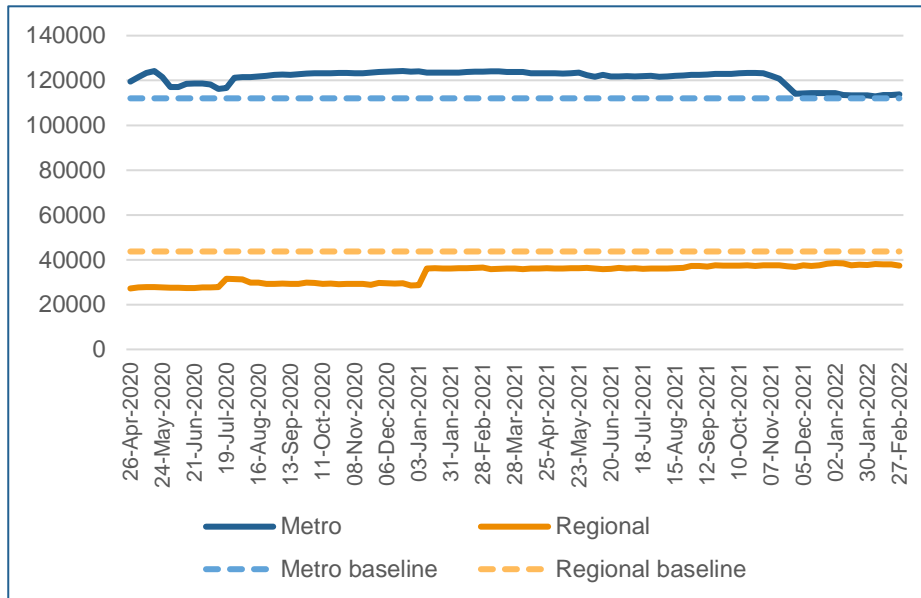## Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

Past month (industry total):
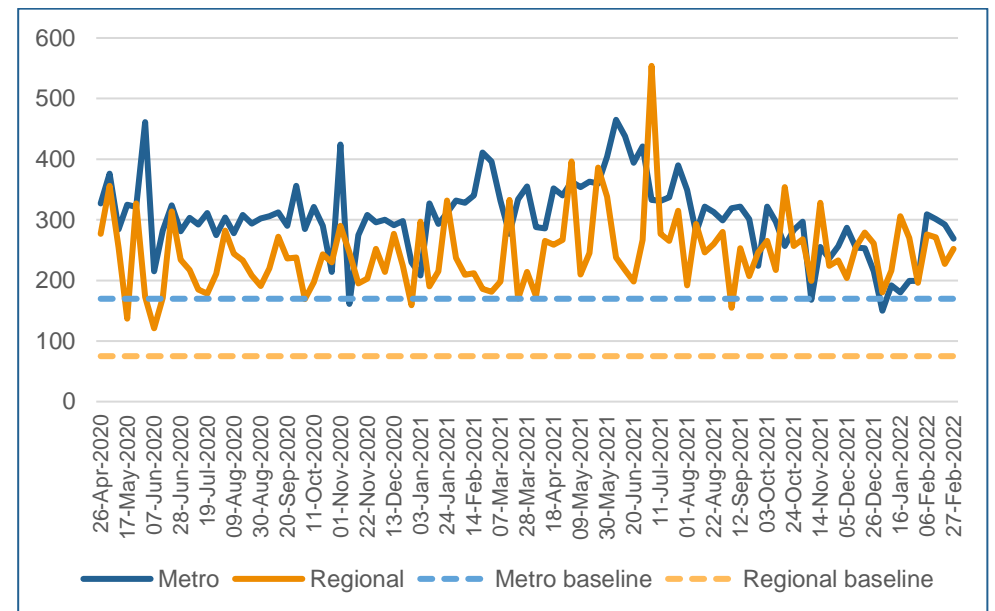
- The February weekly average of 549 customers awarded hardship grants is higher than the January weekly average of 440 customers.

- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for February was 293 grants, 100 more than the January weekly average, and more than 1.5 times the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants.

- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for February was 257 grants, ten more than the January weekly average and over 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): ⬌

- Metro
- Regional
- Metro baseline
- Regional baseline

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.

- There were 151,169 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of February, an increase of 53 compared to the end of January.