

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Summary report – covering data to 30 January 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.

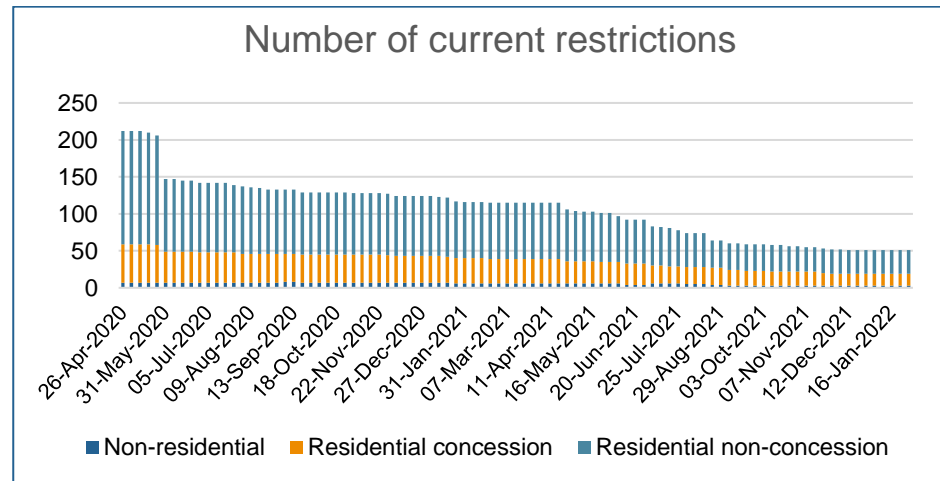
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

Key insights

- **Fewer customers applied for government utility relief grants during January compared to December.** The average weekly application rate was 409 in January, down from 554 in December. In the past month there was a peak of 493 weekly applications and a holiday seasonal dip of 333 applications in the first full week of 2022. In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate fell to 294 in January from 459 in December.
- **The weekly number of customers awarded hardship grants decreased in January compared to December.** On average 193 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in January. This was 39 fewer than the December average of 232 per week, but still more than the pre-pandemic norm of 178. In regional Victoria, the January weekly average was 247 grants, 11 more than the December weekly average of 236. 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 decreased by 27 (0.1 per cent) from 21,153 at the end of December to 21,126 at the end of January.** There was no change in the number of regional customers on water business hardship programs between December and January, with the figure remaining at 5,775.
- **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 January, 51 customers across the state currently have their water supply restricted, the same number of customers as December.
- **The number of payment instalment plans in place decreased by 1,788 in January, to 151,116 at the end of the month.**


Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

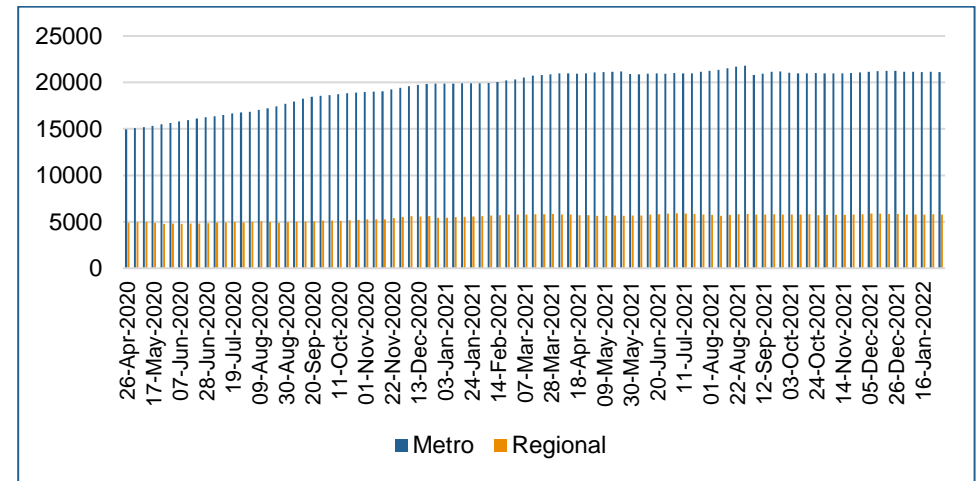
Past month (industry total): 



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

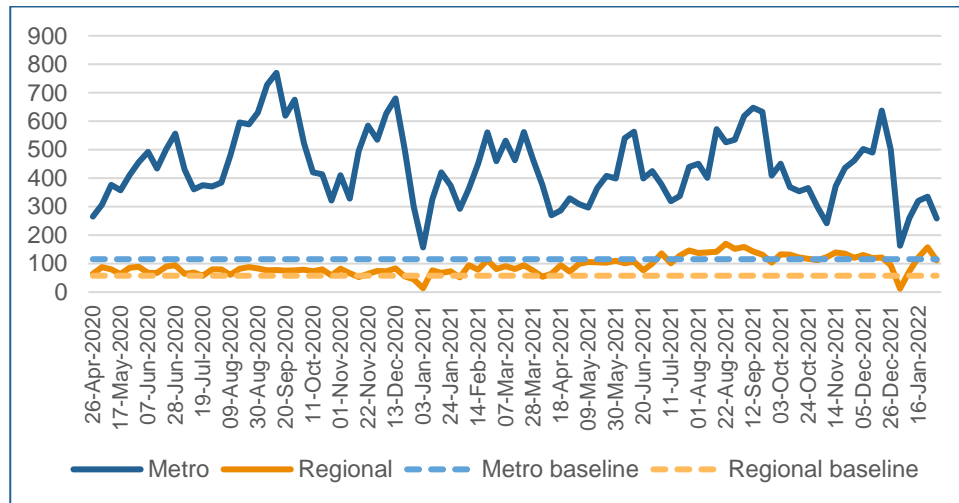
Past month (industry total): 



- The total number of customers in hardship programs decreased by 27 (0.1 per cent) in January, bringing the total to 26,901. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs decreased by 27 customers (0.1 per cent) from 21,153 at the end of December to 21,126 at the end of January. In regional areas, the number of customers on hardship programs at the end of January was 5,775. While this figure varied week to week in January, it is the same number of customers on hardship programs as the end of December.
- On average, 330 customers entered and 336 exited water business hardship programs each week in January.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

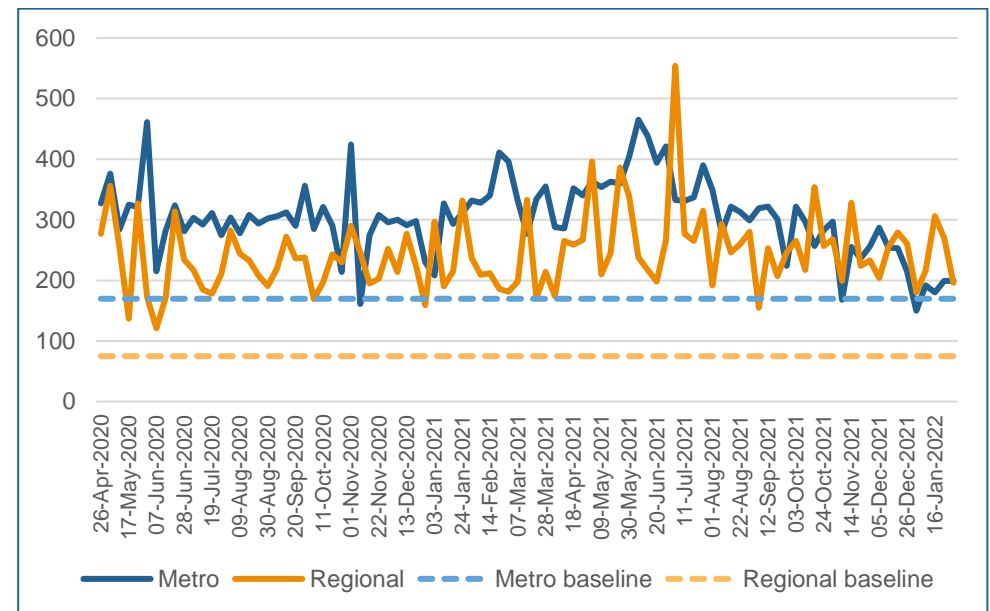
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in January was 409, a decrease on the December average of 554. In the past month there was a peak of 493 weekly applications and a dip of 333 applications occurring in the first full week of the year.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for January was 294, a decrease on the December average of 459 and almost two and a half 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 increased from 96 in December, to 116 in January. This is over double the pre-pandemic historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

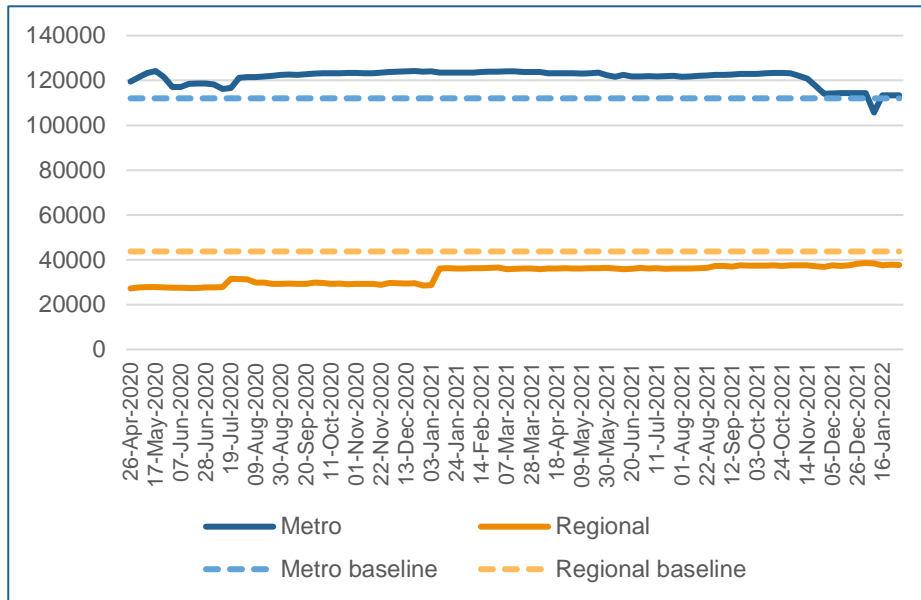
Past month (industry total):



- The January weekly average of 440 customers awarded hardship grants is lower than the December weekly average of 468 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for January was 193 grants, 39 fewer than the December weekly average, and 15 more than the pre-pandemic weekly average of 178 grants, noting a dip below this historical average in the first full week of the year, and a general downward trend since a weekly peak of 465 in early June.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for January was 247 grants, 11 more than the December 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):



- There were 151,116 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of January, a decrease of 1,788 (1.2 per cent) compared to the end of December.

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.