

# Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

## Public report – covering data to 28 March 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.

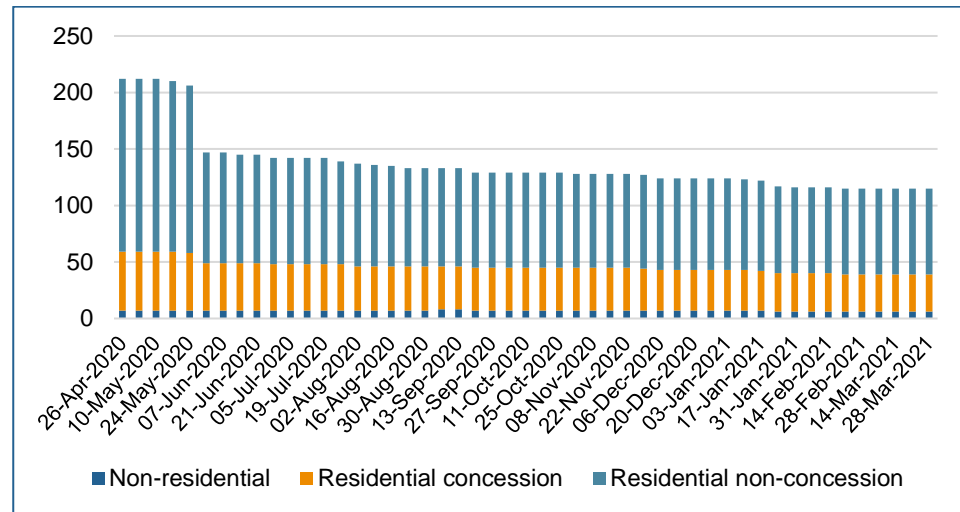
This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

### 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.
- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during March compared to February.** The average weekly application rate was 591 in March, up from 550 in February. In the past month there was a peak of 656 weekly applications and a low of 539 applications.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants returned to the pre-pandemic norm in March.** On average 166 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in March, close to the pre-pandemic norm of 170, but 31 lower than the February average of 197. In regional Victoria the March weekly average was 387, 18 more than the February weekly average and over 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 540 (2.7 per cent) from 19,890 at the end of February to 20,430 at the end of March.** In regional areas, the figure at the end of March was 6,284 compared to 6,209 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.** At the end of March, 115 customers across the state still have their supply restricted, the same number as at the end of February.


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

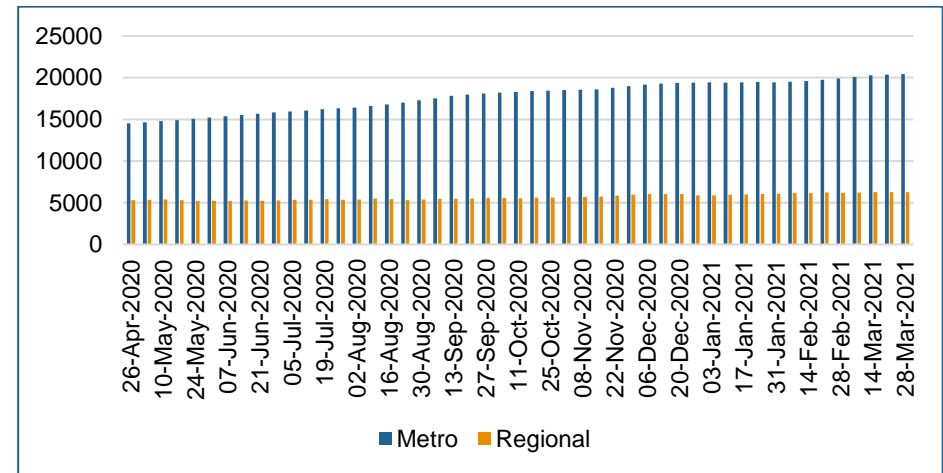
Past month (industry total): 



- A total of 115 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of March, representing no change in the number of restrictions in place since 21 February. The number of water supply restrictions in place has generally decreased since reporting started in April 2020, when 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

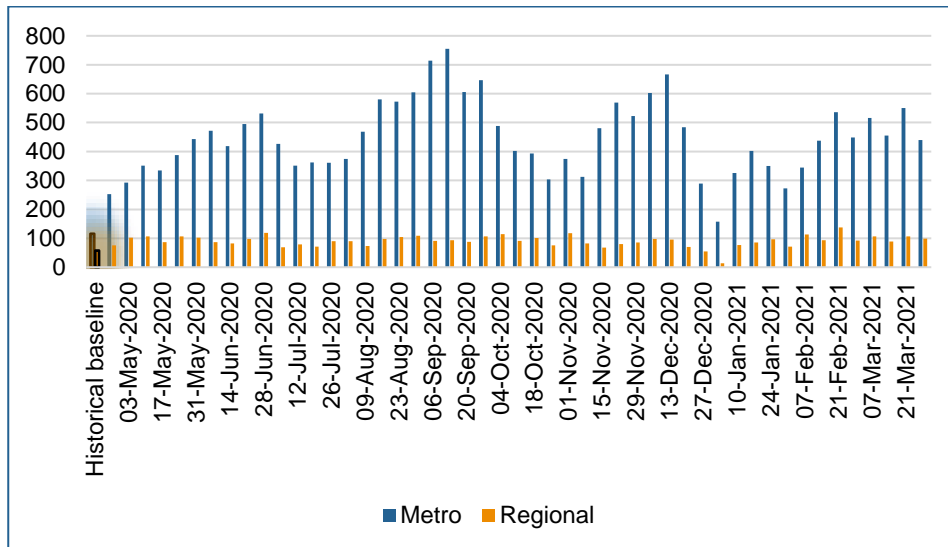
Past month (industry total): 



- The total number of customers in hardship programs rose by 615 (2.4 per cent) in March, bringing the total to 26,714. 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 540 customers (2.7 per cent) from 19,890 at the end of February to 20,430 at the end of March.
- In regional areas, the number was 6,284 at the end of March, 75 more customers than at the end of February.
- On average, 437 customers have entered and 294 exited water business hardship programs each week.

## Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

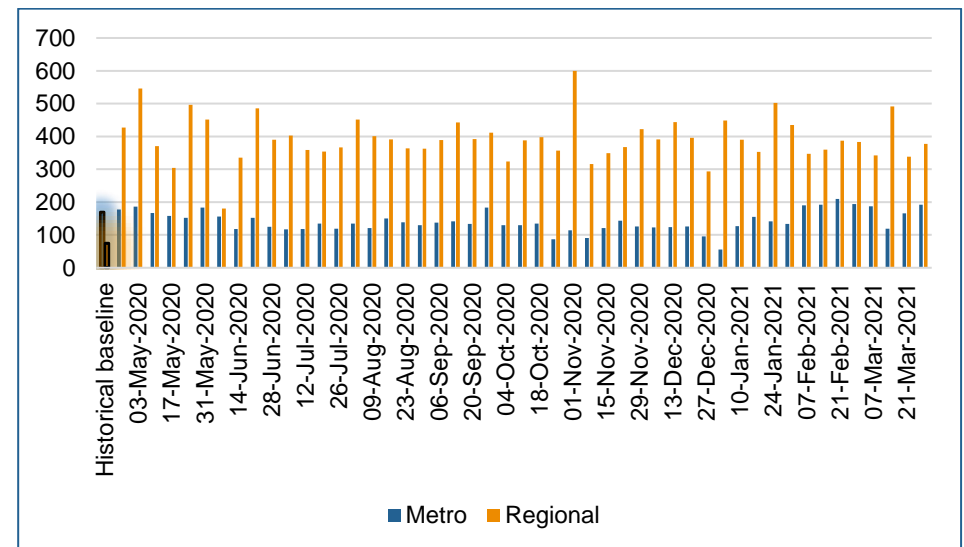
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in March was 591, an increase from the February average of 550. In the past month there was a peak of 656 weekly applications and a low of 539 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for March was over four times the historical average. We have observed that the number of metropolitan customers applying for utility relief grant applications 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 in March was almost twice the historical average.

## Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

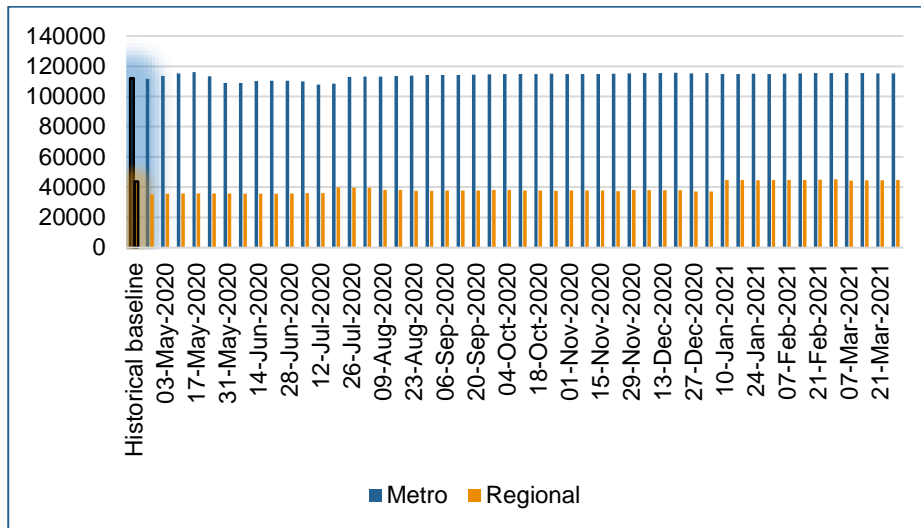
Past month (industry total):



- The March weekly average of 553 customers awarded hardship grants is slightly lower than the February weekly average of 566 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for March was 166 grants, 31 fewer grants than the February weekly average, but close to the historical weekly average of 170 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for March was 387 grants, 18 more grants than the February weekly average, and over 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 159,899 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of March, a decrease of 597 (0.4 per cent) compared to the end of February.

**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](http://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.