

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 29 November 2020

The commission sent voluntary data requests to all retailers to monitor the number of energy customers receiving assistance to pay their bills. The following provides our observations on the data reported to the commission to date.

About the data

Weekly data is reported by retailers on a voluntary basis and is not audited by the commission. This data consists of a subset of the measures included in our annual performance report.

During the week ending 29 November 2020, we received submissions from 19 retailers covering 92 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There were no completed disconnections for non-payment reported by retailers.
- The average number of residential and small business customers who contacted their retailers for assistance peaked in May and had been decreasing until October. In November, the number of customers enquiring about assistance or payment plans increased (but is around half the number of calls during the peak in May).¹
- The overall number of residential customers receiving tailored assistance have been stable in recent months. We note that:
 - the number of customers who cannot pay for their on-going usage slightly fluctuated in November, after continuously decreasing since April. The average arrears of these customers are the highest at the end of November.
 - the number of customers who can pay for their on-going usage slightly fluctuated in November and is currently the highest at the end of the month. The average arrears of these customers are the highest in mid-November.
- The number of small business customers on payment assistance has been stable since the decrease from mid-October. However, the average arrears for electricity and gas small business is currently the highest in November.

¹ The increase in November was also contributed due to one medium retailer started reporting for this indicator again starting from the week ending 29 November. Previously the retailer had a technical issue in its reporting system.

- The number of customers who deferred their payments and their average amount outstanding decreased from the week ending 23 August due to significant decreases by one retailer. In November, there is a slight increase in the number of residential and small business customers deferring payments. The average amount deferred for gas small business customers increased at the end of September before decreasing from October.
- The number of other residential customers with arrears (excluding those receiving payment assistance and deferrals) has been steady since mid-July. For small business, the average number of customers has been steady over the past five months despite fluctuations in certain weeks. The average arrears for residential and small business continue to be higher than in July.
- The average number of missed bill payments for electricity residential customers is currently the highest in November. The average number of gas missed bill payments for residential customers has decreased in November after the peak in October.
- Electricity distributors continued their network relief package to retailers, which allows retailers to defer the payment of network charges and payment deferrals during the pandemic. Eligible retailers applied to defer their network charges payments for October 2020 and received total payment deferrals of \$119,508 for 2,008 residential customers and \$4,977 for 23 small business customers.

Victorian-wide data summary²

Electricity

Indicator	Electricity								
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov
Residential customers – assistance and arrears									
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	34,517 1.3%	31,911 1.2%	30,921 1.2%	30,495 1.1%	31,591 1.2%	33,515 1.3%	35,669 1.3%	36,097 1.4%	36,426 1.4%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	21,817 0.8%	21,017 0.8%	19,268 0.7%	18,612 0.7%	18,357 0.7%	17,896 0.7%	17,781 0.7%	16,524 0.6%	17,316 0.7%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$625 -	\$618 -1%	\$652 +6%	\$641 -2%	\$660 +3%	\$687 +4%	\$682 -1%	\$694 +2%	\$697 +0%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,402 -	\$1,385 -1%	\$1,547 +12%	\$1,529 -1%	\$1,515 -1%	\$1,509 -0%	\$1,524 +1%	\$1,586 +4%	\$1,641 +3%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears									
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	2,278 0.8%	2,471 0.9%	2,618 0.9%	2,614 0.9%	2,547 0.9%	2,527 0.9%	2,631 0.9%	2,535 0.9%	2,243 0.8%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,241 -	\$1,180 -5%	\$1,141 -3%	\$1,327 +16%	\$1,463 +10%	\$1,542 +5%	\$1,570 +2%	\$1,515 -3%	\$1,479 -2%

² These figures can change over time as retailers submit updated data. Some weeks have missing data from retailers. This can affect monthly totals as well as comparisons to other time periods. Note that average arrears are calculated by estimating total arrears divided by the number of customers receiving assistance across the market (reported data only).

Indicator	Electricity								
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov
Customers who deferred payments									
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	8,577	8,848	5,105	3,762	2,968	3,264
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$610	\$639	\$628	\$530	\$477	\$449
	-	-	-	-	+5%	-2%	-16%	-10%	-6%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	2,310	2,269	1,364	439	334	383
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$2,461	\$2,604	\$2,118	\$1,150	\$1,483	\$920
	-	-	-	-	+6%	-19%	-46%	+29%	-38%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)³									
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	268,021	271,930	275,652	283,595	277,631
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$455	\$485	\$507	\$512	\$527
	-	-	-	-	-	+6%	+5%	+1%	+3%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	50,787	52,833	54,774	54,548	53,306
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$885	\$969	\$980	\$885	\$917
	-	-	-	-	-	+10%	+1%	-10%	+4%

³ This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Electricity							
	April (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May (27 Apr to 31 May)	June (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	July (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	August (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	September (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	October (28 Sep to 25 Oct)	November (26 Oct to 29 Nov)
Calls waiting times								
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas (seconds)</i>	111 seconds	75 seconds	89 seconds	80 seconds	95 seconds	76 seconds	66 seconds	58 seconds
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁴								
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	90,765	98,783	104,794	103,367	98,573	99,110	82,349	80,423
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	6,298	7,134	5,762	5,298	5,022	3,930	3,230	3,375
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	1,738	2,332	1,371	633	623	326	200	217
Missed bills (market-wide)								
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	38,535	43,768	46,797	47,137	44,067	44,773	44,071	48,364
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,192	9,548	8,173	8,576	8,923	8,336	8,262	8,905

⁴ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.

Gas

Indicator	Gas								
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov
Residential customers – assistance and arrears									
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	24,547 1.2%	22,125 1.1%	20,542 1.0%	21,030 1.0%	23,315 1.1%	28,133 1.4%	31,682 1.5%	33,890 1.7%	33,171 1.6%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	16,346 0.8%	15,606 0.8%	14,108 0.7%	13,588 0.7%	13,893 0.7%	13,706 0.7%	14,060 0.7%	13,204 0.6%	13,294 0.6%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$512 -	\$498 -3%	\$489 -2%	\$474 -3%	\$496 +5%	\$532 +7%	\$541 +2%	\$557 +3%	\$553 -1%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,108 -	\$1,092 -1%	\$1,141 +4%	\$1,138 -0%	\$1,157 +2%	\$1,215 +5%	\$1,243 +2%	\$1,308 +5%	\$1,331 +2%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears									
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	656 1.0%	696 1.1%	687 1.1%	700 1.1%	746 1.2%	723 1.1%	821 1.3%	777 1.2%	686 1.1%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,164 -	\$1,139 -2%	\$1,436 +26%	\$1,648 +15%	\$1,478 -10%	\$1,681 +14%	\$1,815 +8%	\$2,109 +16%	\$1,909 -9%
Customers who deferred payments									
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	7,072	7,594	4,919	3,147	2,554	2,597
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	- -	- -	- -	\$442 -	\$497 +12%	\$507 +2%	\$459 -9%	\$414 -10%	\$338 -18%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	908	933	515	236	136	153

Indicator	Gas								
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$1,623	\$1,813	\$1,962	\$2,659	\$1,389	\$1,373
	-	-	-	-	+12%	+8%	+36%	-48%	-1%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁵									
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	208,688	220,345	224,481	230,185	226,722
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$368	\$420	\$436	\$435	\$437
	-	-	-	-	-	+14%	+4%	-0%	+1%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	9,657	10,105	9,798	9,453	9,968
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$1,237	\$1,388	\$1,540	\$1,549	\$1,478
	-	-	-	-	-	+12%	+11%	+1%	-5%

⁵ This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Gas							
	April (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May (27 Apr to 31 May)	June (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	July (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	August (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	September (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	October (28 Sep to 25 Oct)	November (26 Oct to 29 Nov)
Calls waiting times								
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	<i>Refer to electricity</i>							
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁶								
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	<i>Refer to electricity</i>							
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	4,064	4,656	4,224	4,035	3,763	2,983	2,504	2,346
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	265	257	189	121	96	62	52	43
Missed bills (market-wide)								
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	27,432	28,085	32,264	32,244	32,603	33,302	34,208	32,768
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,876	1,905	1,703	1,740	1,822	1,968	1,827	1,708

⁶ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.