

## Supporting energy customers through the pandemic

Help with applications for assistance and protections for small businesses are among new rules being rolled out by the state's energy regulator as part of reforms to support Victorians through the coronavirus pandemic.

The Essential Services Commission has brought in rule changes targeting those who have been most affected by the financial impact of the pandemic.

Commission chair Kate Symons says the changes expand protections embedded in the state's payment difficulty framework.

"While Victoria already has the most comprehensive safety net for residential customers in the country, we have added additional protections for customers who are behind on payments.

"There's a new requirement for retailers to provide practical, hands on help to customers to apply for utility relief grants as well as expanding a requirement to offer price checks for anyone who has fallen behind on their energy bills," she said.

The changes complement other measures announced today by Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change Lily D'Ambrosio including expanding financial counselling services to support Victorians needing help with their energy bills.

Commissioner Symons says expanding the safety net to cover small business is a direct response to emerging evidence of the impact of the pandemic on that sector.

"Our [data](#) shows small businesses are falling behind with average arrears\* growing 20 per cent for electricity and 30 per cent for gas between April and the end of July," she said.

The new rules, to take effect from 1 October, will require retailers to provide reasonable assistance to a small business experiencing financial stress due to the pandemic.

Commissioner Symons says the changes are part of a broader commission-wide response.

"We've been meeting with peak bodies, energy retailers and distributors and community organisations since early April as well as collecting data to track the impact of the pandemic to ensure our regulatory decisions are timely, targeted, proportionate and effective.

"Last week, we announced new rules requiring water businesses to provide flexible payment plans, access to hardship assistance, and a hold on debt recovery for all customers," she said.

\*for small businesses in retailer's assistance programs.

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