

Annual data report 2019/20

Energy retailers

17 December 2020

Economic Regulation Authority

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Chair's foreword

The Economic Regulation Authority is Western Australia's independent economic regulator, and its responsibilities include administering the licensing schemes covering energy retailers.

Each year, the ERA reports to the Minister for Energy on trends in energy markets and indicators of energy retailers' performance, with a focus on financial hardship and customer service.

The responses of the Western Australia Government and energy retailers to the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant effect on hardship and customer service data in 2019/20. From March 2020, the Government introduced support measures for electricity customers due to the pandemic. These included a moratorium on disconnections, an increase in the Energy Assistance Payment, waivers on certain fees, and payment extensions. Gas retailers also voluntarily paused disconnections for residential and business customers.

The information in this report covers the whole 2019/20 financial year, and so includes data from several months before the pandemic's economic effects and the Government's response were reflected in the data. For this reason, the data should be used cautiously, as it is not fully representative either of conditions before the pandemic, or of the effects of the responses by government and retailers.

However, the data do suggest that these responses have been effective in helping energy customers stay connected despite increases in bill debt.

The electricity disconnection rate for households decreased to 1.43 per cent, down from 2.0 per cent in 2018/19. Residential gas disconnections also decreased, from 1.95 per cent to 1.83 per cent.

The number of electricity customers in hardship programs decreased from 35,218 in 2018/19 to 30,417 in 2019/20. The decrease in 2019/20 was due to Synergy reporting a reduction in customers on a program after the Energy Assistance Payment was credited to eligible customers' accounts in April 2020.

The average residential electricity bill debt for customers in a hardship program increased from \$551 in 2018/19 to \$772 in 2019/20, because retailers had been prepared to accept higher levels of customer debt than they would have before the pandemic. Monthly data collected by the ERA showed the increase in average bill debt coincided with the introduction of the Covid-19 support measures.

These and subsequent government initiatives are likely to have an even greater effect on hardship data in 2020/21. Electricity prices have been frozen for the year. A \$600 electricity payment for all households, announced in the 2020/21 State Budget, should help to reduce the bill debts of Synergy and Horizon Power customers. Once temporary and one-off pandemic support no longer affect the data, a clearer picture of underlying levels of hardship will emerge.

This report also provides a summary of broader trends in the energy retail markets.

In 2019/20, the number of residential electricity customers increased by 0.2 per cent to 1,050,519 customers, and the number of business electricity customers decreased by 1.9 per cent to 101,742.

In the six years to 2019/20, business customer numbers decreased by 8.2 per cent. The largest decrease in business customers was in 2017/18, which was mostly due to a decrease

in Synergy's business customer numbers. Synergy attributed the decrease to customers electing to consolidate their accounts and customers transferring to other retailers.

The number of residential and business gas customers both increased by 1 per cent, to 735,682 and 9,576 customers respectively.

Competition in the Western Australia's retail gas market continues to intensify, with Alinta Energy's market share of residential gas customers decreasing from 63.2 per cent in 2018/19 to 58.8 per cent in 2019/20, continuing a trend observed for several years. Kleenheat, AGL and Simply Energy all increased their market shares in 2019/20.

Nicola Cusworth
Chair, Economic Regulation Authority

1. Market overview

Main points

- The number of residential electricity customers increased by 0.2 per cent in 2019/20, while business electricity customers numbers decreased by 1.9 per cent.
- The number of residential and business gas customers both increased by 1 per cent.
- The residential and business market shares of the largest gas retailer, Alinta Energy, fell by 4.4 percentage points and 2.8 percentage points respectively.
- In March 2020, the ERA granted an electricity retail license to Peel Renewable Energy Pty Ltd to supply small use customers.

This section provides an overview of the energy retail market in Western Australia, including:

- the number of electricity and gas retailers
- electricity and gas market data
- residential and business electricity customers by retailer¹
- residential and business gas customers by retailer²
- pre-payment meter customers.³

1.1 Electricity

1.1.1 Electricity retailers

There were 13 retailers authorised to supply small use customers as at 30 June 2020:⁴

- AER Retail Pty Ltd
- Alinta Energy Pty Ltd
- Amanda Energy Pty Ltd
- A-Star Electricity Pty Ltd
- Change Energy Pty Ltd
- CleanTech Energy Pty Ltd
- Clear Energy Pty Ltd
- Electricity Generation and Retail Corporation (trading as Synergy)
- Peel Renewable Energy Pty Ltd⁵

¹ Throughout this report the term 'electricity customer' means a customer who consumes less than 160 megawatt-hours of electricity per year, referred to as a 'small use electricity customer'.

² Throughout this report the term 'gas customer' means a customer who consumes less than 1 terajoule of gas per year, referred to as a 'small use gas customer'.

³ Pre-payment meter customers are electricity customers who are supplied through a pre-payment meter.

⁴ Throughout the rest of this report the term 'customer' means a 'small use customer'.

⁵ Electricity retail licence ERL28 was [granted](#) to Enwave WA Pty Ltd in March 2020. On 23 September 2020, the ERA [approved](#) a minor amendment to ERL28 to change the licensee's registered name from Enwave WA Pty Ltd to Peel Renewable Energy Pty Ltd. Peel Renewable Energy currently has no customers and has been excluded from this report.

- Perth Energy Pty Ltd
- Regional Power Corporation (trading as Horizon Power)
- Rottnest Island Authority
- Wesfarmers Kleenheat Gas Pty Ltd.

Table 1 shows the number of licensed electricity retailers.

Table 1: Number of licensed electricity retailers at 30 June 2015 to 2020

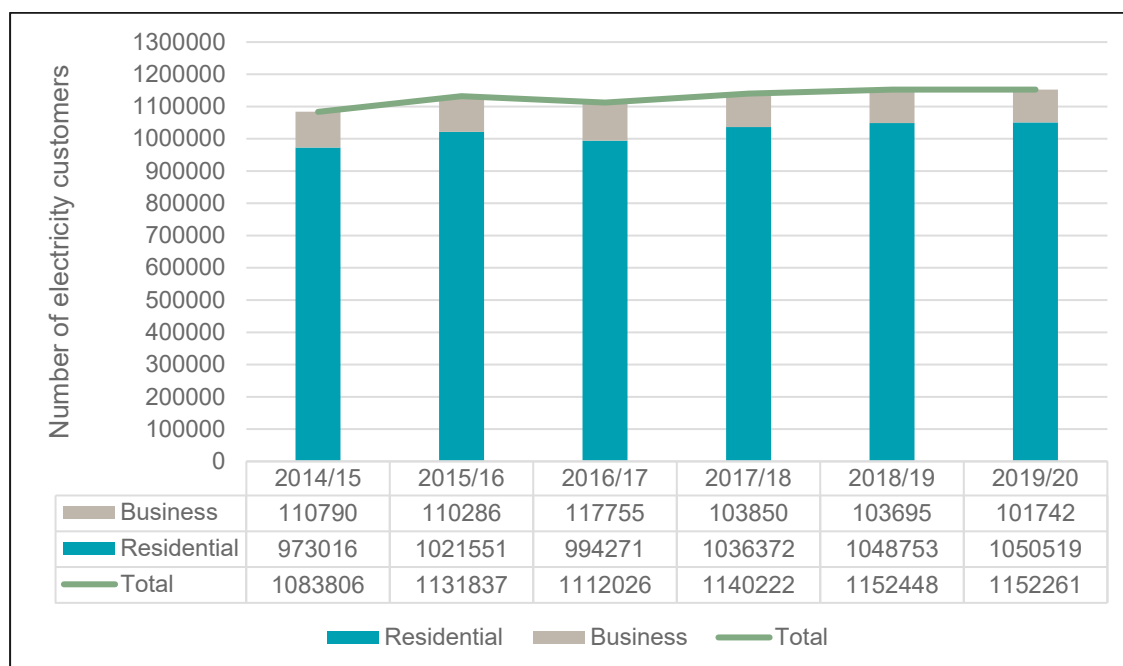
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Electricity retailers	7	10	11	12	12	13

Seven retailers supply customers through Western Power's South West Interconnected System (SWIS) in the lower half of Western Australia.⁶ Horizon Power and the Rottnest Island Authority supply customers through their own distribution networks outside the SWIS.⁷

1.1.2 Electricity customers

Figure 1 shows the number of residential and business electricity customers and total electricity customers.

Figure 1: Number of residential and business electricity customers at 30 June 2015 to 2020^{8 9}



⁶ The SWIS covers a geographic area from Kalbarri to Albany, and from Perth to Kalgoorlie.

⁷ The Rottnest Island Authority is the exclusive retailer on Rottnest Island. Horizon Power is the only retailer currently supplying regional mainland areas of the State outside the SWIS.

⁸ Horizon Power advised that they had incorrectly included large-use business customers in the figure for 2016/17.

⁹ The number of electricity business customers decreased by 11.8 per cent in 2017/18. The decrease was the result of Horizon Power excluding large-use business customers from their data and Synergy reporting a decrease in business customers.

In 2019/20, the number of residential customers increased by 0.2 per cent, while the number of business customers decreased by 1.9 per cent. In the six years to 2019/20, residential customer numbers increased by 8.0 per cent, while business customer numbers decreased by 8.2 per cent. The largest decrease in business customers was in 2017/18, which was mostly due to a decrease in Synergy's business customer numbers. Synergy attributed the decrease to customers electing to consolidate their accounts and customers transferring to other retailers.¹⁰

1.1.3 Contestable and non-contestable customers in the SWIS

Residential and business electricity customers in the SWIS are separated into two groups - contestable customers and non-contestable customers. Customers consuming between 50 megawatt-hours and 160 megawatt-hours of electricity each year are contestable customers and can choose their retailer. Customers consuming less than 50 megawatt-hours are non-contestable customers and can be supplied only by Synergy, which means that its residential and business customers are the sum of its contestable and non-contestable customers. Customers supplied by other retailers in the SWIS are all contestable.

Almost all households and small businesses are non-contestable customers.

1.1.4 Residential electricity customers

Table 2 shows the number of residential electricity customers by retailer.

Table 2: Number of residential electricity customers by retailer at 30 June 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	38,299	38,936	39,373	39,398	37,925	36,956
Perth Energy	0	0	0	2	2	2
Synergy	934,717	982,615	954,898	996,972	1,010,826	1,013,561
Total	973,016	1,021,551	994,271	1,036,372	1,048,753	1,050,519

In 2019/20, there were 455 contestable residential electricity customers, equivalent to 0.04 per cent of total residential customers. Four hundred and fifty-three of these customers were supplied by Synergy and two were supplied by Perth Energy.¹¹

Horizon Power is the only retailer that has supplied residential customers outside the SWIS since the regional electricity market was deregulated in 2004.

1.1.5 Business electricity customers

Table 3 shows the number of business electricity customers by retailer.

In 2019/20, there were 11 retailers active in the business electricity market, nine of which supplied customers through the SWIS.¹² Clear Energy supplied business customers for the

¹⁰ For example, a customer that initially elects to have individual accounts for individual sites later changes it to a single account for multiple sites.

¹¹ Refer to indicator CCR1 in the customer numbers tab of the retailer data published on the ERA website.

¹² A-Star Electricity stopped supplying business customers in 2015/16.

first time in 2019/20.¹³ Horizon Power and Rottneest Island Authority were the only retailers supplying customers outside the SWIS.¹⁴

In 2019/20, there were 84,676 non-contestable and 9,464 contestable business electricity customers in the SWIS.¹⁵ The non-contestable customers were exclusively supplied by Synergy.

Synergy supplied 53.1 per cent of the 9,464 contestable customers, Alinta supplied 37.2 per cent, and seven small retailers supplied the remaining 9.7 per cent.

Table 3: Number of business electricity customers by retailer at 30 June 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AER Retail	n/a	21	23	12	26	20
Alinta Energy	2,548	2,428	2,775	2,858	2,826	3,519
Amanda Energy	n/a	73	95	138	121	111
A-Star Electricity	17	0	0	0	0	0
Change Energy	n/a	n/a	6	25	57	115
CleanTech	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	74	63
Clear Energy	0	0	0	0	0	2
Horizon Power	8,224	7,873	8,549	7,720	7,884	7,577
Kleenheat	n/a	28	74	107	126	170
Perth Energy	364	599	301	867	413	436
Rottneest Island Authority	26	25	24	24	24	25
Synergy	99,611	99,239	105,908	92,099	92,144	89,704
Total	110,790	110,286	117,755	103,850	103,695	101,742

1.1.6 Pre-payment meter electricity customers

Pre-payment meter customers are required to pay for their electricity prior to consumption.

The deployment of pre-payment meters is currently restricted to customers in Horizon Power's licence area and Synergy's customers in the Ninga Mia Aboriginal community in the Goldfields, connected to the SWIS.^{16 17}

¹³ This is the first time that Clear Energy has supplied customers since the licence was granted in May 2010.

¹⁴ Rottneest Island Authority supplied businesses on Rottneest Island and Horizon Power supplied businesses in mainland areas of the State outside the SWIS.

¹⁵ Refer to indicator CCR4 in the customer numbers tab of the retailer data published on the ERA website.

¹⁶ *Electricity Industry (Code of Conduct) (Pre-payment Meter Areas) Notice 2016.*

¹⁷ *Electricity Industry (Code of Conduct) (Pre-payment Meter Areas) Notice 2010.*

Table 4 shows the number of pre-payment customers supplied by Horizon Power and Synergy. The total number of Horizon Power pre-payment meter customers decreased by 2.7 per cent in 2019/20.

Table 4: Number of electricity pre-payment meter customers by retailer at 30 June 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	1,014	1,202	1,190	1,221	1,332	1,296
Synergy	16	16	14	16	12	11
Total	1,030	1,218	1,204	1,237	1,344	1,307

1.2 Gas

1.2.1 Gas retailers

Nine retailers are authorised to supply gas to customers:

- AGL Sales Pty Ltd
- Alinta Energy
- Amanda Energy
- Esperance Gas Distribution Company Pty Ltd (EGDC)
- Kleenheat
- Origin Energy Retail Limited
- Perth Energy
- IPower 2 Pty Ltd and IPower Pty Ltd (trading as Simply Energy)
- Synergy.

Table 5 shows the number of licensed gas retailers.

Table 5: Number of licensed gas retailers at 30 June 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Gas retailers	5	5	7	9	9	9

AGL, Alinta Energy, Kleenheat, Origin, Perth Energy, Amanda Energy, Simply Energy and Synergy supply customers through the gas distribution networks operated by ATCO Gas Australia.¹⁸ Kleenheat also supplies a small number of customers on two distribution networks it owns in Albany (Oyster Harbour) and Margaret River. EGDC supplies customers in Esperance through the distribution network operated by Esperance Power Station.¹⁹

¹⁸ ATCO has gas distribution networks located in the Coastal, Goldfields-Esperance and Great Southern supply [areas](#).

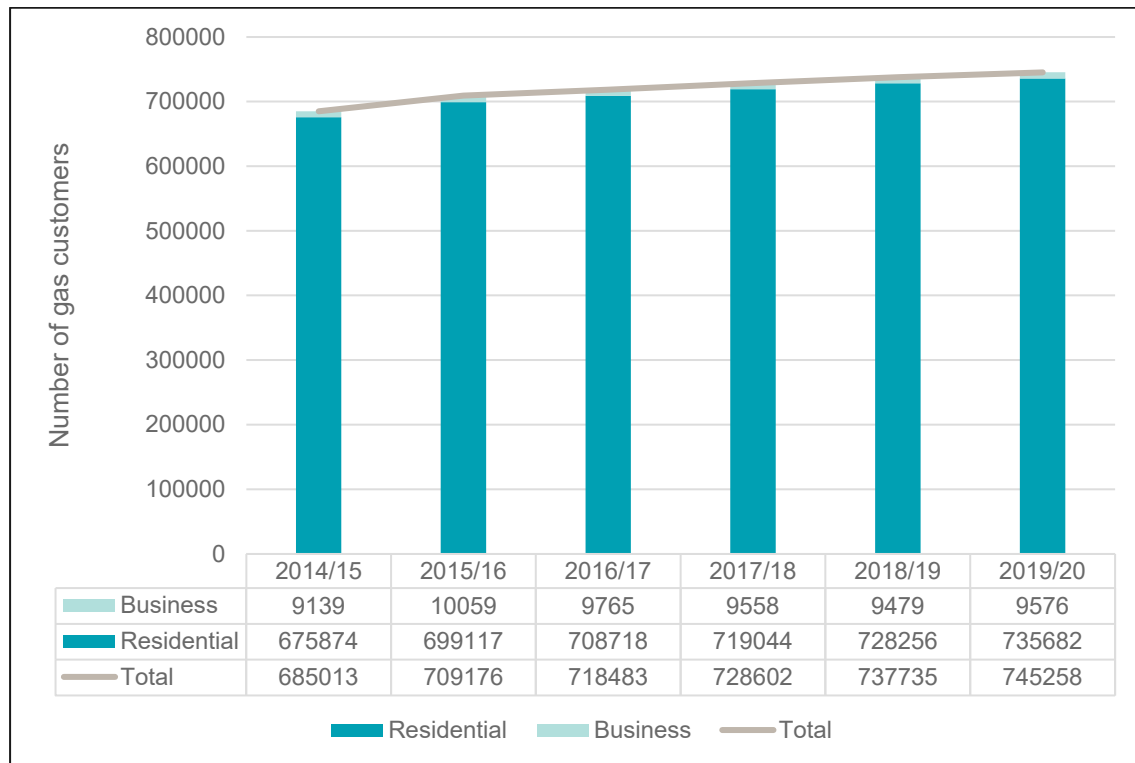
¹⁹ EGDC and Esperance Power Station are related businesses that are owned by Infrastructure Capital Group.

1.2.2 Gas customers

Figure 2 shows the number of residential and business gas customers.

In 2019/20, the number of residential customers increased by 1.0 per cent. Residential customer numbers have been trending upwards for the six years reported.

Figure 2: Number of residential and business gas customers at 30 June 2015 to 2020



1.2.3 Residential gas customers

Table 6 shows the number of residential gas customers by retailer.

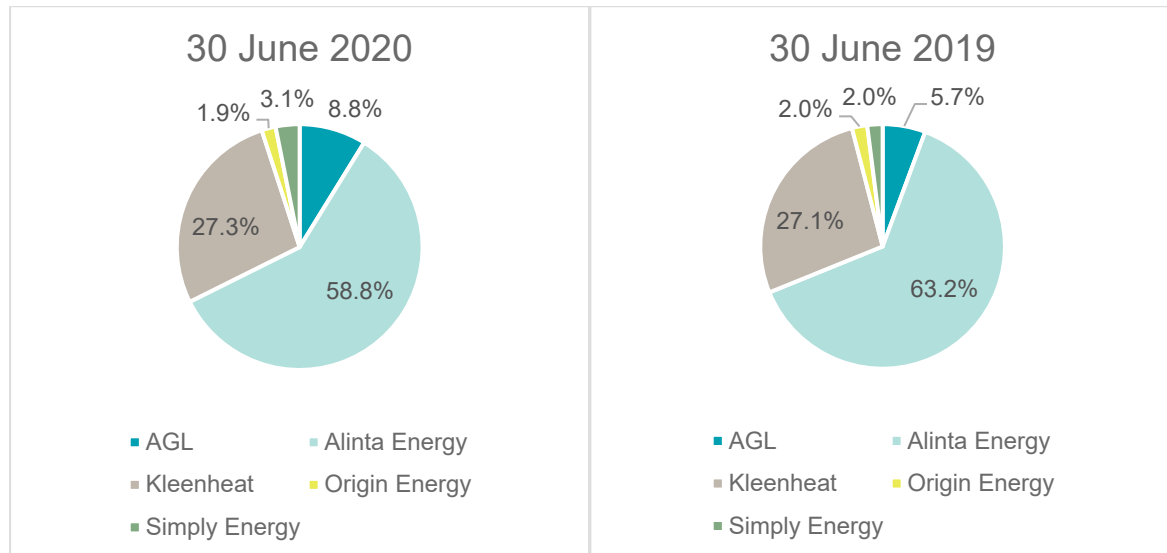
Table 6: Number of residential gas customers by retailer at 30 June 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	n/a	n/a	n/a	20,851	41,197	64,730
Alinta Energy	628,171	611,142	554,903	494,696	460,018	432,750
Kleenheat	47,353	87,648	153,478	196,274	197,325	201,102
Origin Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	6,880	14,626	13,700
EGDC	350	327	337	339	317	326
Perth Energy	0	0	0	4	6	3
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	14,767	23,071
Total	675,874	699,117	708,718	719,044	728,256	735,682

The entry of four new retailers to the residential gas market in the coastal supply area in the past three years has substantially reduced Alinta Energy's residential customer base.²⁰ In 2019/20, the number of customers supplied by Alinta Energy fell by 5.9 per cent.

Figure 3 compares the share of the residential coastal supply area gas market held by retailers in 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Figure 3: Residential coastal supply area gas market share by retailer at 30 June 2019 and 2020 (%)



During 2019/20, AGL, Origin Energy, Perth Energy and Simply Energy increased their combined share of residential customers from 9.7 per cent to 13.8 per cent. Kleenheat's market share increased by 0.2 percentage points despite a 1.9 per cent increase in customers (see Table 6).

The 5.9 per cent fall in the number of customers supplied by Alinta Energy translated to a 4.4 percentage point decrease in its market share.

1.2.4 Business gas customers

Table 7 shows the number of business gas customers by retailer.

Kleenheat's business customer base increased for the fifth consecutive year. In 2019/20, the number of customers supplied increased by 8.9 per cent.

Alinta Energy's business customer base continued the downward trend of the past five years in 2019/20. The decline is due to increased competition in the business gas market, particularly in the past two years. Since 2014/15, the number of business customers supplied by Alinta Energy has decreased by 28.8 per cent.

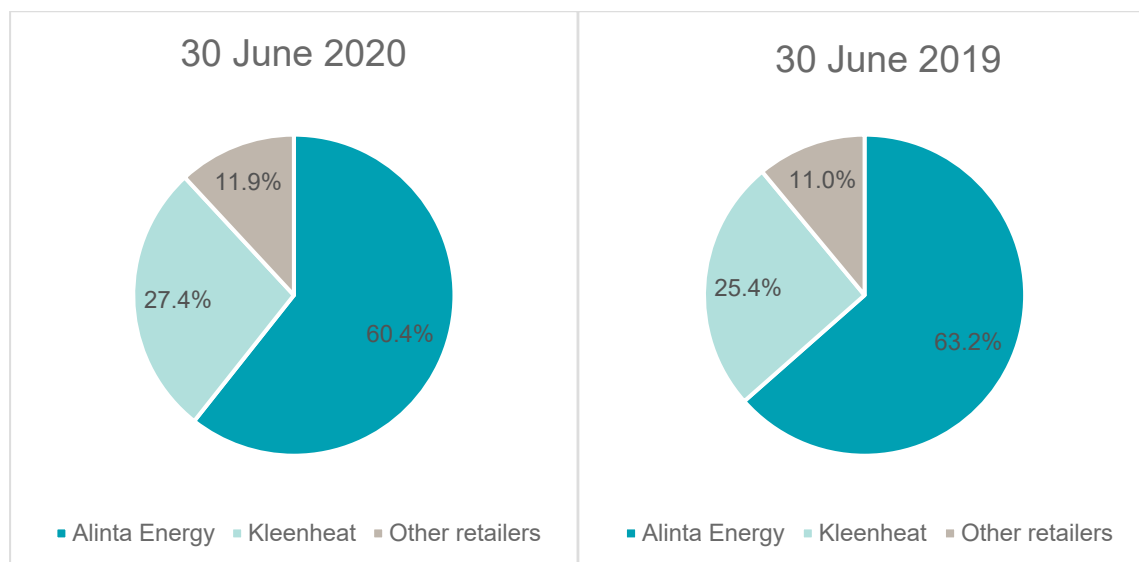
²⁰ The coastal supply area covers ATCO's mid-west and south-west gas distribution systems, which extends from Geraldton to Busselton and as far inland as Harvey. EGDC doesn't supply customers in the coastal supply area.

Table 7: Number of business gas customers by retailer at 30 June 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	n/a	n/a	n/a	580	537	517
Alinta Energy	8,127	8,319	7,612	6,497	5,993	5,788
Amanda Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	1
Synergy	107	137	175	173	144	167
Kleenheat	871	1,554	1,924	2,070	2,406	2,620
Origin Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	77	236	206
EGDC	34	49	46	45	41	37
Perth Energy	0	0	8	116	120	229
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	11
Total	9,139	10,059	9,765	9,558	9,479	9,576

Figure 4 compares the share of the business gas market held by retailers in the coastal supply area in 2018/19 and 2019/20.²¹

The 3.4 per cent reduction in Alinta Energy's business customer base has translated to a 2.8 percentage point reduction in its share of the business gas market in 2019/20.

Figure 4: Business gas market share in the coastal supply area by retailer at 30 June 2019 and 2020 (%)

²¹ The coastal supply area covers ATCO's mid-west and south-west gas distribution systems, which extend from Geraldton to Busselton and as far inland as Harvey. EGDC has been excluded because it doesn't supply customers in the coastal supply area.

2. Payment difficulties

Main points

- The percentage of business electricity customers granted more time to pay a bill in 2019/20 was the highest for the six years reported.
- The number of residential and business gas customers granted more time to pay a bill decreased in 2019/20.
- Both Horizon Power and Synergy reported an increase in residential electricity customers successfully completing their instalment plans.

The *Code of Conduct for the Supply of Electricity to Small Use Customers* (Electricity Code) and the *Compendium of Gas Customer Licence Obligations* (Gas Compendium) require retailers to offer assistance to residential customers experiencing payment difficulties.²²

Payment difficulties exist when a customer is unable to pay an outstanding amount because of a change in personal circumstances (for instance, loss of income or unexpected costs) over a relatively short period. Retailers must also consider requests for assistance from a business customer who is experiencing payment difficulties. In practice, retailers offer their business customers most of the same assistance options that are available to residential customers.

The Electricity Code and the Gas Compendium require retailers to offer residential customers in payment difficulties:

- Additional time to pay a bill.
- On request of the customer, an interest-free and fee-free instalment plan to pay a bill or arrears (including any disconnection or reconnection charges).

Retailers must ensure that the instalment plan is fair and reasonable, taking into consideration the customer's capacity to pay and their consumption history.²³

For customers in financial hardship, retailers are also required to:

- Give reasonable consideration to a request to reduce the customer's fees, charges or debt.
- Advise customers about concessions and how to access them.
- Advise customers about independent financial counselling services and other assistance services that are available.
- Advise customers of other financial assistance and grants schemes and how to access them.

The number of customers on a hardship program is discussed in chapter 4.

²² The Gas Compendium is contained in Schedule 2 of all gas trading licences. A copy of these licences is available on the ERA [website](#). The Electricity Code is available on the ERA [website](#).

²³ Retailers are also required to offer an instalment plan to customers experiencing payment difficulties only upon request.

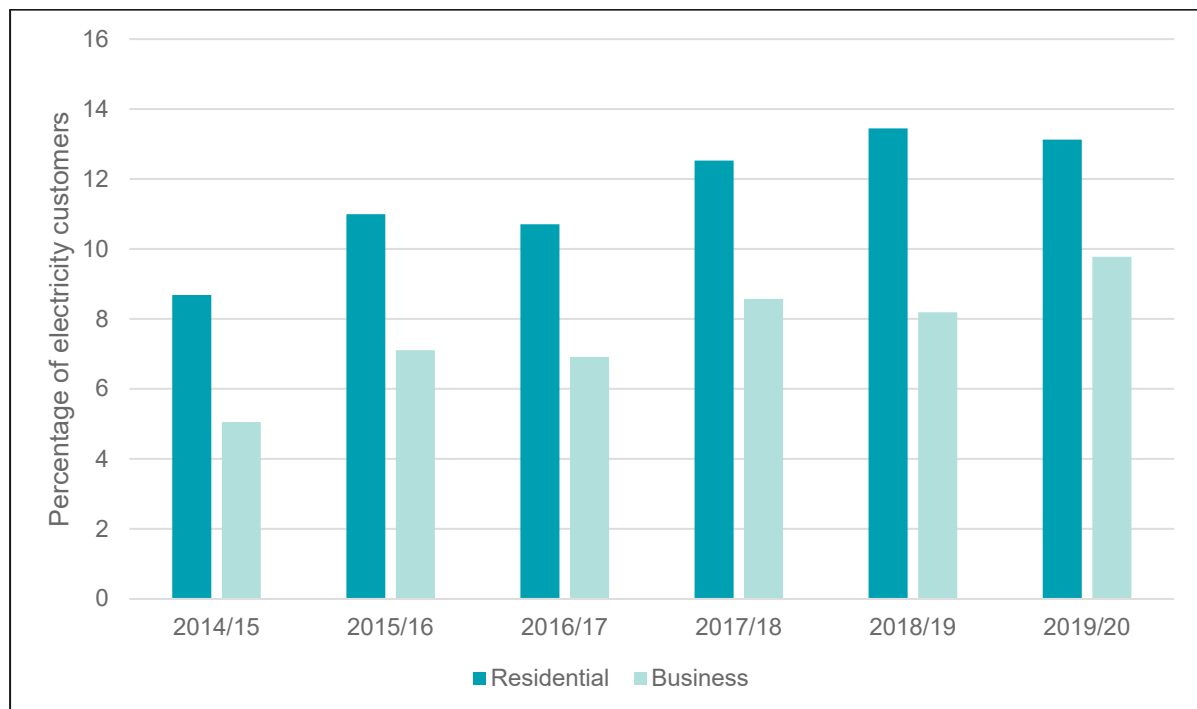
2.1 Electricity

2.1.1 Electricity customers granted more time to pay a bill

Figure 5 shows the percentage of residential and business electricity customers granted more time to pay a bill.

The percentage of residential customers granted more time to pay a bill decreased slightly in 2019/20 but remained over 13 per cent of customers. The percentage of business customers granted more time to pay a bill has trended upward for the past six years. In 2019/20, the percentage of business customers granted more time to pay a bill (9.8 per cent) was the highest for the six years reported.

Figure 5: Electricity customers granted more time to pay a bill at 30 June 2015 to 2020 (%)



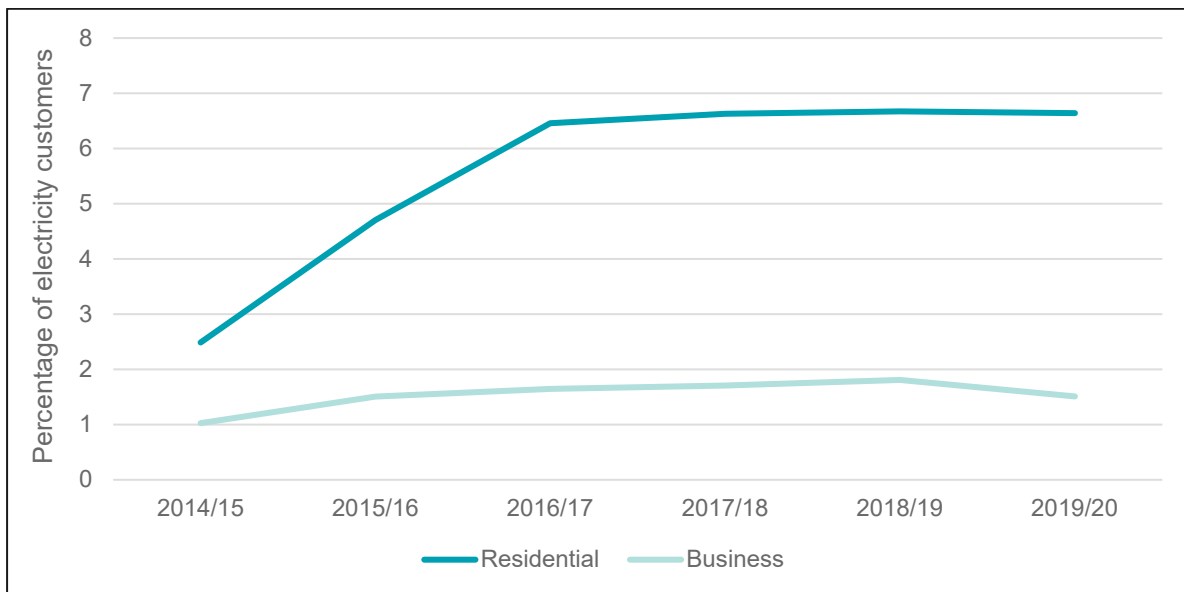
2.1.2 Electricity customers on instalment plans

Figure 6 shows the percentage of residential and business electricity customers who were on an instalment plan.

In 2019/20, the percentage of residential customers on an instalment plan was 6.6 per cent, this has been the fourth consecutive year that the percentage of residential customers on an instalment plan has been above 6 per cent. The relatively constant percentage of customers on instalment plans after 2016/17 coincides with the exclusion of customers on a hardship program who were on an instalment plan.

The percentage of business customers on an instalment plan decreased to 1.6 per cent.²⁴

²⁴ The decrease in the percentage of business customers on an instalment plan was due to a 26.8 per cent decrease reported by Synergy. Synergy advised this decrease was in part due to the State Government \$2,500 WA Small Business Tariff Offset payment for Synergy and Horizon Power customers that consume less than 50 megawatt hours (MWh) per annum, [announced](#) on 31 March 2020.

Figure 6: Electricity customers on instalment plans at 30 June 2015 to 2020 (%)

2.1.3 Residential electricity customers (excluding hardship customers) on instalment plans

Table 8 shows the number of residential electricity customers (excluding hardship customers) on an instalment plan.²⁵

The number of residential customers on an instalment plan decreased in 2019/20.

Table 8: Residential electricity customers (excluding hardship customers) on instalment plans by retailer at 30 June 2018 to 2020

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	929	786	243
Synergy	4,853	5,978	5,629
Total	5,782	6,764	5,872

Table 9 compares the number of residential electricity customers (excluding hardship customers) who had their instalment plans cancelled for non-payment with those who successfully completed their plans between 2017/18 and 2019/20.

In 2019/20, both Horizon Power and Synergy reported more customers successfully completing their instalment plan and Synergy reported a decrease in the number of customers who had their instalment plan cancelled for non-payment.²⁶

²⁵ The ERA commenced collecting data for this indicator in 2017/18.

²⁶ Synergy reported this was in part due to the electricity disconnection moratorium [announced](#) by the State Government in March 2020.

Table 9: Residential electricity customers (excluding hardship program customers) who successfully completed their plan and those who had their instalment plan cancelled between 2017/18 and 2019/20

	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20	
	Horizon Power	Synergy	Horizon Power	Synergy	Horizon Power	Synergy
Successfully completed instalment plan	736	28,249	421	25,020	449	30,891
Instalment plan cancelled for non-payment	1,912	28,912	2,073	31,331	2,384	28,306

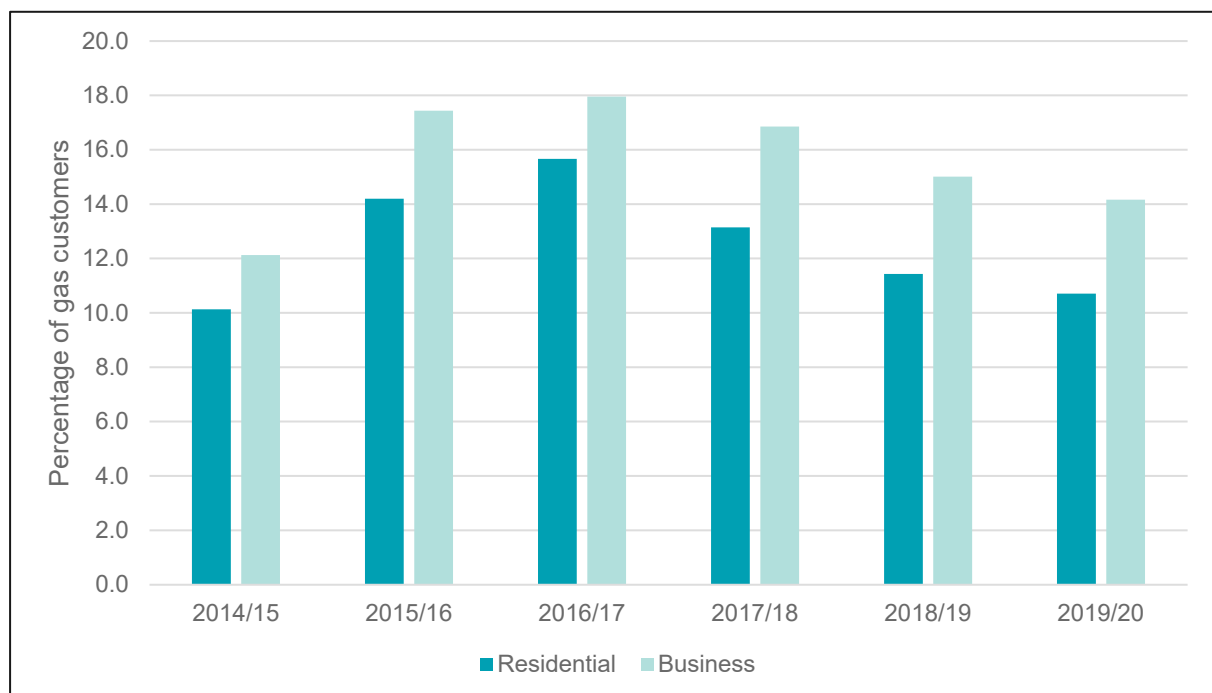
2.2 Gas

2.2.1 Gas customers granted more time to pay a bill

Figure 7 shows the percentage of residential and business gas customers granted more time to pay a bill.

Fewer residential and business gas customers were granted more time to pay a bill in 2019/20.

Figure 7: Gas customers granted more time to pay a bill at 30 June 2015 to 2020 (%)



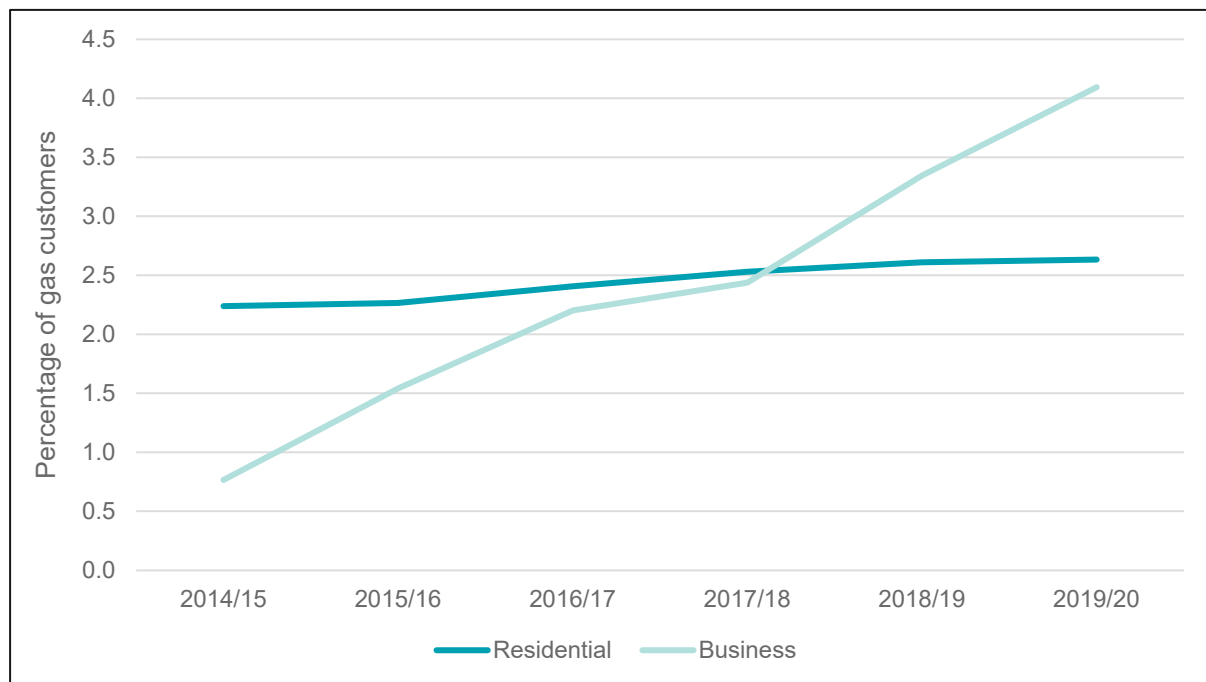
2.2.2 Gas customers on instalment plans

Figure 8 shows the percentage of residential and business gas customers on an instalment plan.

The percentage of both residential and business gas customers on an instalment plan has trended upwards for the past five years. In 2019/20, the percentage of business customers on

an instalment plan (4.1 percent) was the highest for the six years reported. The percentage of residential customers on an instalment plan remained the same in 2019/20 (2.6 per cent).

Figure 8: Gas customers on an instalment plan at 30 June 2015 to 2020 (%)



2.2.3 Residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) on instalment plans

Table 10 shows the number and percentage of residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) on an instalment plan.^{27 28}

²⁷ The ERA commenced collecting data for this indicator in 2017/18.

²⁸ Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 10 because it did not have any customers on an instalment plan during the reporting period.

Table 10: Residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) on an instalment plan by retailer at 30 June 2018 to 2020

		2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	Number	37	133	118
	%	0.18	0.32	0.18
Alinta Energy	Number	7,971	8,608	7,791
	%	1.63	1.89	1.80
Kleenheat	Number	3,072	1,724	1,263
	%	1.57	0.88	0.63
Origin Energy ²⁹	Number	1	37	28
	%	0.01	0.25	0.20
EGDC	Number	18	0	2
	%	5.37	0.00	0.61
Simply Energy ³⁰	Number	n/a	21	155
	%	n/a	0.14	0.67
Total	Number	11,099	10,544	9,380
	%	1.55	1.46	1.28

Table 11 compares the number of residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) who had their instalment plans cancelled for non-payment with those who have successfully completed their plans.³¹

AGL, Alinta Energy, Origin Energy and Simply Energy reported increases in the number of customers who successfully completed their instalment plans and customers who had their instalment plan cancelled for non-payment in 2019/20.

²⁹ Origin Energy provided updated figures for 2018/19.

³⁰ 2018/19 is the first year that Simply Energy has provided data to the ERA.

³¹ Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 11 because it did not have any customers on an instalment plan during the reporting period.

Table 11: Residential gas customers (excluding hardship program customers) who have successfully completed their plan and those who have had their instalment plan cancelled between 30 June 2018 and 2020

	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20	
	Successfully completed instalment plan	Instalment plan cancelled for non-payment	Successfully completed instalment plan	Instalment plan cancelled for non-payment	Successfully completed instalment plan	Instalment plan cancelled for non-payment
AGL	25	79 ³²	268	634	409	766
Alinta Energy	4,816	1,956	4,950	1,978	6,964	3,936
Kleenheat	1,680	2,983	2,722	3,231	2,280	2,420
Origin Energy ³³	0	0	28	197	133	242
EGDC	2	0	0	0	3	1
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	1	16	29	359

³² Reported as n/a in 2018/19 Energy retailers report.

³³ Origin Energy provided updated figures for 2018/19.

3. Energy bill debt of customers other than customers on a hardship program

Main points

- In 2019/20 average bill debt for residential and business electricity customers was the highest for the four years reported.
- The average energy bill debt was much higher for residential electricity customers supplied by Horizon Power than customers supplied by Synergy.
- The average energy bill debt of residential electricity customers continues to be much higher than the energy bill debt of residential gas customers.

Energy bill debt is separately reported for customers on a retailer's hardship program and those not on a hardship program. This is the third year that the ERA has reported on energy bill debt of customers other than customers on a hardship program.

Energy bill debt is defined as an amount owed to the retailer which has been outstanding for 90 calendar days or more.³⁴

Energy bill debt data for customers on a hardship program is discussed in section 4 of this report.

3.1 Electricity

3.1.1 Residential electricity customers (excluding hardship customers) repaying an energy bill debt

Table 12 shows the number of residential electricity customers repaying an energy bill debt and the average bill debt for those customers.

The average debt of Horizon Power's customers has been much higher than that of Synergy's customers for the past four years. In 2019/20, average bill debt was the highest for the four years reported.³⁵

³⁴ ERA, Electricity Retail Licence Performance Reporting Handbook, April 2019, p.23 ([online](#)).

³⁵ In October 2020, the State Government [announced](#) a \$600 electricity bill credit to every WA household to be received from 1 November 2020. This is expected to substantially reduce the number of customers with a bill debt.

Table 12: Residential electricity customers (excluding hardship customers) repaying an energy bill debt and the average bill debt by retailer at 30 June 2017 to 2020

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	985	1,498	670	836
	Average bill debt (\$)	850	715	903	1,496 ³⁶
Synergy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	21,867	10,669	9,978	10,451
	Average bill debt (\$)	363	396	379	541 ³⁷

3.1.2 *Business electricity customers repaying an energy bill debt*

Table 13 shows the number of business electricity customers repaying an energy bill debt and the average bill debt for those customers.³⁸

³⁶ Horizon Power advised that they have put in place enhancements to their reporting systems that allow them to better capture customers debt which has increased the figure for 2019/20.

³⁷ Synergy attributed the increase due to the disconnection moratorium from March 2020, changes in collections practices and payment difficulties experienced by customers due to COVID-19.

³⁸ A-Star, Clear Energy, CleanTech and the Rottneast Island Authority have been excluded from Table 13 because they have not had any customers repaying an energy bill debt for the past four years.

Table 13: Business electricity customers repaying an energy bill debt and the average bill debt by retailer at 30 June 2017 to 2020

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AER Retail	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	0	1	2	1
	Average bill debt (\$)	0	3,000	6,000	3,338
Alinta Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	10	303	48	353
	Average bill debt (\$)	1,450	1,390	2,083	6,194
Amanda Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	17	13	4	2
	Average bill debt (\$)	2,061	3,432	2,527	433
Change Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	0	0	0	1
	Average bill debt (\$)	0	0	0	1,260
Horizon Power	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	148	211	118	142
	Average bill debt (\$)	3,379	3,931	5,590	5,135
Kleenheat	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	1	0	1	11
	Average bill debt (\$)	2,930	0	1,005	2,498
Perth Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	5	3	3	56
	Average bill debt (\$)	2,285	0	15,100	3,983
Synergy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	1,984	1,739	1,326	538
	Average bill debt (\$)	893	1,094	1,172	2,599

3.2 Gas

3.2.1 Residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) repaying an energy bill debt

Table 14 shows the number of residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) repaying a bill debt and the average bill debt for those customers.³⁹

³⁹ Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 14 because they have not had any customers repaying an energy bill debt for the past four years.

In 2019/20, all retailers reported an increase in average energy bill debt for residential gas customers.⁴⁰ Comparing Table 14 with Table 12 shows that the average energy bill debt for residential gas customers is less than for residential electricity customers.

Table 14: Residential gas customers (excluding hardship customers) repaying an energy bill debt and the average bill debt by retailer at 30 June 2017 to 2020

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	n/a	261	1,135	1,971
	Average bill debt (\$)	n/a	136	363	497
Alinta Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	15,579	1,318	1,419	922
	Average bill debt (\$)	47	88	80	99
Kleenheat	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	570	1,497	1,979	1,708
	Average bill debt (\$)	76	89	116	134
Origin Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	n/a	42	267	428
	Average bill debt (\$)	n/a	103	190	223
EGDC	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	1	2	0	2
	Average bill debt (\$)	220	234	0	365
Simply Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	n/a	n/a	242	1690
	Average bill debt (\$)	n/a	n/a	95	190

3.2.2 Business gas customers repaying an energy bill debt

Table 15 shows the number of business gas customers repaying an energy bill debt and the average bill debt for those customers.⁴¹

In 2019/20, all retailers reported an increase in average energy bill debt for business gas customers.⁴²

⁴⁰ Retailers reported that this may be due to COVID-19 restrictions. Monthly data collected from gas retailers due to COVID-19 indicates that average bill debt for residential customers is trending upwards for the first quarter of the 2020/21 reporting period.

⁴¹ Amanda Energy, EGDC and Simply Energy have been excluded from Table 15 because they have not had any customers repaying an energy bill debt for the past three years.

⁴² Retailers reported that this may be due to COVID-19 restrictions. Monthly data collected from gas retailers due to COVID-19 indicates that average bill debt for business customers is trending upwards for the first quarter of the 2020/21 reporting period.

Table 15: Business gas customers repaying an energy debt and average bill debt at 30 June 2017 to 2020

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	n/a	27	37	33
	Average bill debt (\$)	n/a	367	608	1,137
Alinta Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	226	12	8	14
	Average bill debt (\$)	510	541	304	457
Synergy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	58	10	7	17
	Average bill debt (\$)	1,804	902	1,047	1,307
Kleenheat	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	2	19	28	75
	Average bill debt (\$)	272	391	439	998
Origin Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	n/a	0	7	7
	Average bill debt (\$)	n/a	0	298	1,950
Perth Energy	Number of customers repaying a bill debt	0	0	2	18
	Average bill debt (\$)	0	0	658	769

4. Hardship programs

Main points

- The total number of electricity customers on a hardship program decreased by 13.6 per cent in 2019/20.
- The total number of gas customers on a hardship program decreased by 3 per cent in 2019/20.
- Just over 90 per cent of electricity customers successfully completed their hardship plan, compared to 35 percent of gas customers.
- The average bill debt of electricity customers on a hardship program was 82 per cent higher than the average bill debt of gas customers.
- The average bill debt for Western Australian electricity and gas customers was substantially less than in other states.

Access to a hardship program is available only to residential electricity and gas customers. Throughout this section of the report, references to customers are to residential customers.

The ERA undertook a phased introduction of new hardship program performance indicators in 2016/17 and 2017/18. In 2016/17, licensees were required to provide data for two hardship program indicators. This was increased to seventeen indicators in 2017/18.

The purpose of the hardship program performance indicators is to provide the ERA, as well as other stakeholders such as policy makers and consumer representative organisations, with reliable data on the effectiveness of hardship programs.

Financial hardship may be caused by sustained exposure to factors that affect a customer's ability to manage their utility debt. The most common factors include loss of income, budget management problems caused by low or insecure income, separation or divorce, physical and mental health issues, loss of a loved one, and domestic violence. In these circumstances a customer is unable to pay an outstanding amount without affecting their capacity to meet their basic living needs (such as rent or mortgage, groceries or other utilities).

The Electricity Code and the Gas Compendium require retailers to offer assistance to residential customers experiencing financial hardship. This assistance includes:⁴³

- Additional time to pay a bill.
- An interest-free and fee-free instalment plan to pay a bill or arrears (including any disconnection or reconnection charges).
- Reasonable consideration to a request to reduce the customer's fees, charges or debt.
- Information about concessions and how to access them.
- Information about independent financial counselling services and other assistance services that are available.
- Information about other financial assistance and grants schemes and how to access them.

⁴³ The Gas Compendium is contained in Schedule 2 of all gas trading licences. A copy of these licences is available on the ERA [website](#). The Electricity Code is available on the ERA [website](#).

Retailers must ensure any instalment plan is fair and reasonable, taking into account the customer's capacity to pay and their consumption history.⁴⁴

The Australian Energy Regulator and the Essential Services Commission of Victoria have required electricity and gas retailers to report hardship program data for several years. Where possible, the ERA's new indicators have been aligned with the Australian Energy Regulator's indicators to allow comparison of Western Australian data with other jurisdictions. Readers should exercise some caution when comparing data between jurisdictions, because of differences in the cost of energy and regulatory obligations to assist customers experiencing payment difficulties and financial hardship.

Data for all the hardship program and energy bill debt indicators can be found in the data tables published on the ERA website. This chapter focuses on the number of customers on a hardship program and the amount of energy debt owed by these customers.⁴⁵

4.1 Electricity

4.1.1 Electricity customers on a hardship program

Table 16 shows the number and percentage of electricity customers on a hardship program.

Table 16: Number and percentage of electricity customers on a hardship program at 30 June 2017 to 2020

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	Number	1,150	912	1,511	1,518
	%	2.92	2.31	3.98	4.11
Synergy	Number	20,798	30,640	33,707	28,899
	%	2.18	3.07	3.33	2.85
Total	Number	21,948	31,552	35,218	30,417
	%	2.21	3.04	3.36	2.9

The total number of electricity customers on a hardship program decreased by 13.6 per cent in 2019/20.^{46 47}

Table 17 shows the reasons electricity customers exited a hardship program.

Most customers exiting a hardship program in all three years reported did so because they had either successfully completed the program or had the retailer's agreement. More

⁴⁴ Retailers are also required to offer an instalment plan to customers experiencing payment difficulties only upon request.

⁴⁵ This report only presents data for six of the 17 indicators. Data for the remaining 11 indicators is in the [data tables](#) published on the ERA website. A complete list of the hardship program indicators is in section 4.9 of the [Electricity Retail Licence Performance Reporting Handbook](#).

⁴⁶ Synergy attributed the decrease to COVID-19 including the disconnection moratorium from March 2020, decrease in collections activities and eligible recipients receiving energy assistance payments to clear their debts (the [Energy Assistance Payment boost](#)). This has resulted in less customers requesting financial hardship assistance.

⁴⁷ Monthly data collected from Horizon Power and Synergy due to COVID-19 indicates the number of customers on a hardship program continued to decrease in the first quarter of the 2020/21 reporting period.

customers successfully completed the program in 2019/20 than the previous two years (26,879 customers).

Table 17: Reasons electricity customers exited a hardship program between 2017/18 and 2019/20

	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Successfully completed	17,242	88.2	22,508	87.9	26,879	90.2
Switched, transferred or left the retailer	132	0.7	150	0.6	302	1.0
Excluded or removed for non-compliance ⁴⁸	2,168	11.1	2,940	11.5	2,617	8.8

4.1.2 Electricity hardship customer debt

Figure 9 shows the average energy bill debt for electricity hardship customers by retailer. While the total number of customers on a hardship program decreased in 2019/20, the total average energy bill debt of customers on hardship programs increased by 40.1 per cent to \$772.⁴⁹

Figure 9: Electricity hardship customer average bill debt by retailer at 30 June 2017 to 2020

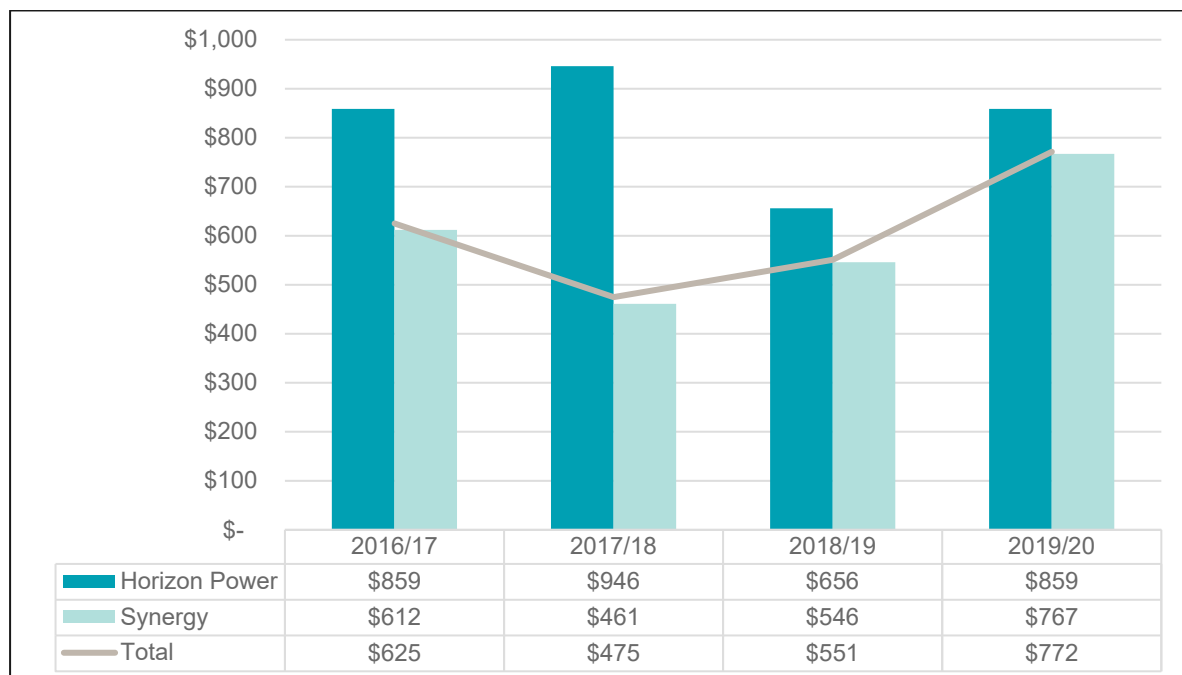


Table 18 shows the electricity hardship customer average energy bill debt at the time of entering a hardship program.

⁴⁸ This may include instances where the hardship customer fails to make contact with the retailer or make agreed payments towards their energy account.

⁴⁹ Monthly data collected from Horizon Power and Synergy due to COVID-19 indicates the average bill debt for customers on a hardship program continued to increase in the first quarter of the 2020/21 reporting period.

Table 18: Electricity hardship customer average energy bill debt at the time of entering a hardship program by retailer between 2017/18 and 2019/20 (\$)

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	862	1,442 ⁵⁰	758 ⁵¹
Synergy	513	503	560
Total	531	579	580

4.2 Gas

4.2.1 Gas customers on a hardship program

Table 19 shows the number and percentage of gas customers on a hardship program.

Table 19: Number and percentage of gas customers on a hardship program by retailer at 30 June 2017 to 2020

		2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	Number	n/a	4	42	52
	%	n/a	0.02	0.10	0.08
Alinta Energy	Number	5,272	4,434	5,012	4,717
	%	0.95	0.90	1.09	1.09
Kleenheat	Number	391	790	496	548
	%	0.25	0.40	0.25	0.27
Origin Energy	Number	n/a	0	21	23
	%	n/a	0.00	0.14	0.17
EGDC	Number	6	4	5	2
	%	1.78	1.18	1.58	0.61
Simply Energy	Number	n/a	n/a	3	72
	%	n/a	n/a	0.02	0.31
Total	Number	5,669	5,232	5,579	5,414
	%	0.80	0.73	0.77	0.74

⁵⁰ Horizon Power reported the average bill debt at the date their data was prepared rather than throughout the year, which explains the large increase reported in 2018/19.

⁵¹ Horizon Power reported in 2019/20 they focused on improving hardship identification and so increased the number of hardship customers who entered the hardship program with a lower energy bill debt (between \$0 and \$500).

The total number of gas customers on a hardship program decreased by 3 per cent in 2019/20. Comparing Table 19 with Table 16 shows that the overall percentage of gas customers on a hardship program is much lower than electricity customers.⁵²

Table 20 shows the reasons gas customers exited a hardship program.

Table 20: Reasons gas customers exited a hardship program between at 30 June 2018 and 2020

	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Successfully completed	11,068	54.9	3,410	24.4	3,612	34.8
Switched, transferred or left the retailer ⁵³	4,322	21.4	4,114	29.4	1,864	18
Excluded or removed for non-compliance ⁵⁴	4,775	23.7	6,466	46.2	4,891	47.2

4.2.2 Hardship debt for gas customers

Table 21 shows the average energy bill debt for gas customers on a hardship program by retailer at 30 June.⁵⁵ The total average energy bill debt of customers in hardship programs increased by 102.4 per cent to \$423 in 2019/20.⁵⁶

Table 21: Average energy bill debt for gas customers on a hardship program by retailer at 30 June 2017 to 2020 (\$)

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	n/a	101	500	683
Alinta Energy	246	312	206	444
Kleenheat	126	140	220	227
Origin Energy	n/a	0	138	102
EGDC	381	0	402	239
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	323	444
Total	238	286	209	423

⁵² Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 19 because none of its customers have been on a hardship program for the past four years.

⁵³ The 2017/18 and 2018/19 percentages were transposed in the 2018/19 Energy retailers report.

⁵⁴ This may include instances where the hardship customer fails to contact the retailer or make agreed payments towards their energy account.

⁵⁵ Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 21 and 22 because none of its customers have been on a hardship program for the past four years.

⁵⁶ Retailers reported that this may be due to COVID-19 restrictions and hardship customers having payment difficulties. Monthly data collected from gas retailers due to COVID-19 indicates the average bill debt for customers on a hardship program continued to increase in the first quarter of the 2020/21 reporting period.

Table 22 shows the average energy bill debt of gas hardship customers at the time of entering a hardship program.⁵⁷

Table 22: Average energy bill debt of gas hardship customers at the time of entering a hardship program 2017/18 to 2019/20 (\$)

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	86	392	605
Alinta Energy	229	192	568
Kleenheat	267	344 ⁵⁸	262
Origin Energy	n/a	237	179
EGDC	619	757	367
Simply Energy	n/a	373	410
Total	230	199	522

4.2.3 Hardship customer average bill debt by jurisdiction

Table 23 compares the average bill debt of electricity and gas customers on a hardship program in Western Australia with customers in New South Wales and South Australia.

Table 23: Jurisdictional comparison of average energy bill debt of electricity and gas hardship customers between 2016/17 to 2019/20 (\$)^{59 60}

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Electricity				
Western Australia	625	475	551	772
South Australia	1,496	1,694	1,863	1,970
New South Wales	1,006	916	1,212	1,274
Gas				
Western Australia	245	286	209	423
South Australia	521	585	621	599
New South Wales	682	668	684	658

⁵⁷ Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 21 and 22 because none of its customers have been on a hardship program for the past four years.

⁵⁸ Amount was incorrectly reported as \$44 in 2018/19 report.

⁵⁹ South Australia and New South Wales data from: Australian Energy Regulator, 2020, *AER Annual Retail Markets Report 2019-20 – Charts and Tables*, ([online](#)) [accessed 1 Dec 2020].

⁶⁰ The figures from South Australia and New South Wales are from the 2019/20 AER report and some have been amended from previous reports.

The average bill debt for Western Australian electricity and gas customers was the lowest of the three jurisdictions in all four years.

5. Disconnections

Main points

- In March 2020, a disconnection moratorium was put in place to assist electricity residential customers experiencing hardship as a result of COVID-19.
- Gas retailers introduced a pause on disconnections for residential and business customers to assist customers experiencing hardship as a result of COVID-19.
- The number of electricity and gas residential and business customer disconnections decreased in 2019/20, partly due to the pause in disconnections in response to COVID-19.
- The pause in gas disconnections resulted in a modest reduction in the number of disconnections for residential and business customers.
- For the six years reported, the Western Australian residential disconnection rate continued to be higher than rates in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.

Energy is an essential service. Disconnection for non-payment of bills should be viewed as a last resort after payment plans and hardship programs have failed. The Electricity Code and Gas Compendium require retailers to provide customers experiencing financial hardship or payment difficulties with adequate opportunity to enter into an arrangement to avoid disconnection.

The rate of disconnections is an important indicator of how retailers meet their obligations to customers in debt while ensuring that customers continue to receive energy supply. It is also a valuable indicator of how affordable energy is to customers.

This section will look at disconnections that resulted from a customer's failure to pay a bill.^{61 62}

5.1 Total electricity disconnections

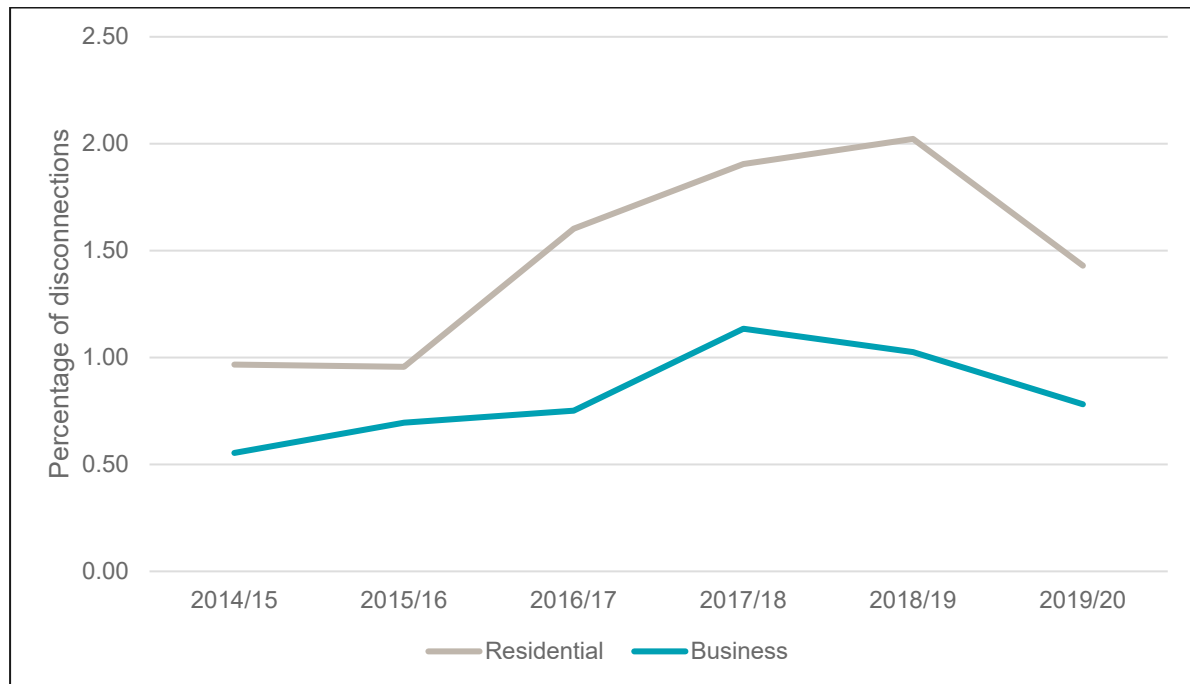
Figure 10 shows the percentage of residential and business electricity customer disconnections.

In 2019/20 the percentage of residential electricity disconnections decreased for the first time in three years. The percentage of business electricity disconnections decreased for the second consecutive year.⁶³

⁶¹ Customers can also be disconnected for taking supply without having an account with the retailer (called 'non-application') or denying access to the meter.

⁶² Refer to section 4.3 of the Handbook for definitions.

⁶³ The decrease in 2019/20 can be attributed, at least in part, to the disconnection moratorium [announced](#) by the State Government in March 2020 in response to COVID-19, which only applies to residential customers supplied by Horizon Power and Synergy. The disconnection moratorium has been [extended](#) until 30 June 2021, with the State Government providing additional [guidance](#) on the eligibility criteria for customers.

Figure 10: Residential and business electricity customer disconnections from 30 June 2014 to 2020 (%)

5.2 Electricity residential disconnections

Table 24 shows the number and percentage of residential electricity customer disconnections by retailer.

Table 24: Number and percentage of residential electricity customer disconnections by retailer between 2014/2015 and 2019/20

		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Horizon Power	Number	1,084	1,705	1,826	1,943	3,156 ⁶⁴	2,741
	%	2.83	4.38	4.64	4.93	8.32	7.42
Synergy	Number	8,328	8,069	14,109	17,800	18,056	12,273
	%	0.89	0.82	1.48	1.79	1.79	1.21
Total	Number	9,412	9,774	15,935	19,743	21,212	15,014
	%	0.97	0.96	1.60	1.91	2.02	1.43

Total residential electricity disconnections decreased in 2019/20 after trending upwards over the five previous years reported. The decrease can be attributed, at least in part, to the disconnection moratorium announced by the State Government in March 2020 in response to COVID-19. The disconnection moratorium has been extended until 30 June 2021.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ The increase in disconnections reported by Horizon Power in 2018/19 was mostly due to it previously reporting the number of customers who were disconnected, instead of the total number of times customers had been disconnected.

⁶⁵ Monthly data collected from electricity retailers shows there hasn't been any disconnections since April 2020 (when the data was first collected).

5.3 Electricity business disconnections

Table 25 shows the number and percentage of business electricity customer disconnections by retailer.⁶⁶

While most retailers reported a decrease in business customer disconnections in 2019/20 Horizon Power and Perth Energy reported an increase in the number of business customer disconnections.

Table 25: Number and percentage of business electricity customer disconnections by retailer 2014 to 2020

		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	Number	10	21	16	11	13	6
	%	0.39	0.86	0.58	0.38	0.46	0.17
Amanda Energy	Number	n/a	0	0	1	1	0
	%	n/a	0.0	0.0	0.72	0.83	0
Horizon Power	Number	41	128	144	124	82	128
	%	0.50	1.63	1.68	1.61	1.04	1.69
Kleenheat	Number	n/a	0	2	2	3	1
	%	n/a	0.0	2.70	1.87	2.38	0.59
Perth Energy	Number	3	2	4	15	18	29
	%	0.82	0.33	1.33	1.73	4.36	6.65
Synergy	Number	560	616	719	1,026	946	631
	%	0.56	0.62	0.68	1.11	1.03	0.70
Total	Number	614	767	885	1,179	1,063	795
	%	0.55	0.70	0.75	1.14	1.03	0.78

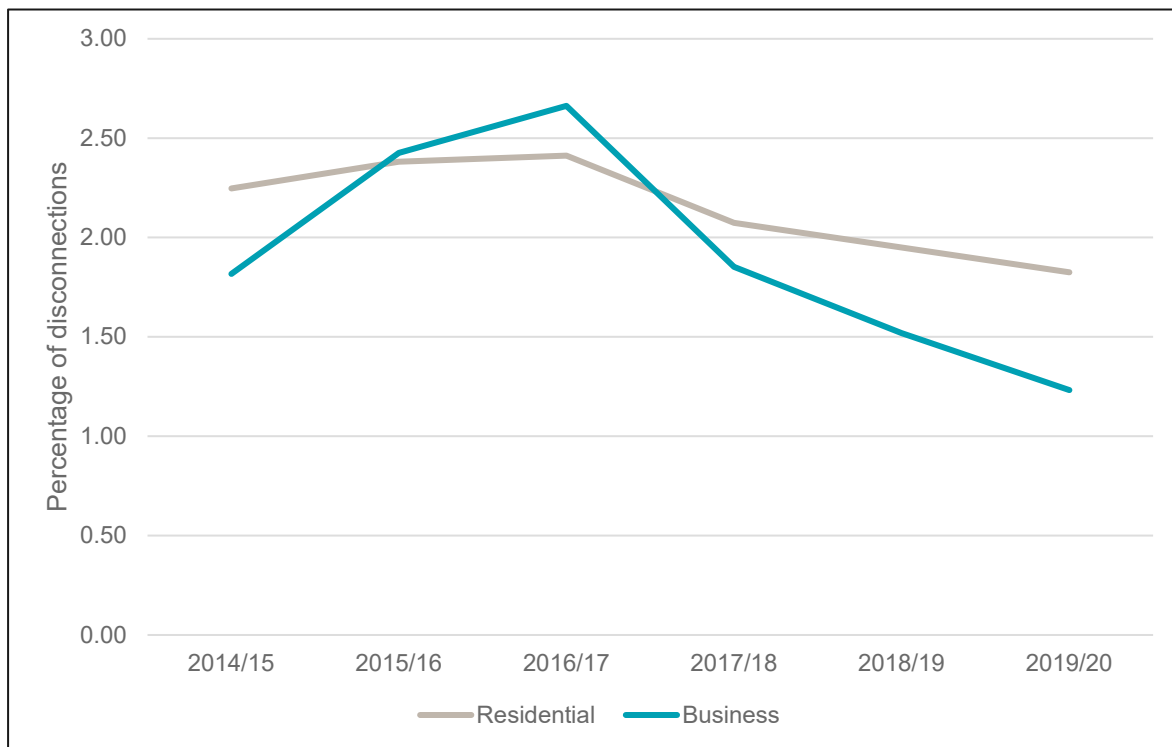
5.4 Total gas disconnections

Figure 11 shows the percentage of residential and business gas customer disconnections.

The percentage of business and residential gas customer disconnections decreased in 2019/20. The percentage of residential and business gas disconnections were the lowest for the six years reported. As part of their response to COVID-19 all gas retailers have paused disconnections, which accounts for some of the reduction in disconnections reported in 2019/20.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Six retailers did not disconnect any customers within the six-year reporting period and have been excluded from Table 25: AER Retail, A-Star, Change Energy, CleanTech, Clear Energy and Rottnest Island Authority.

⁶⁷ Monthly data collected from gas retailers due to COVID-19 shows there have been no disconnections since April 2020 (when the data was first collected).

Figure 11: Residential and business gas customer disconnections 2014 to 2020 (%)

5.5 Gas residential disconnections

Table 26 shows the number and percentage of residential gas customer disconnections by retailer.⁶⁸

Table 26: Number and percentage of residential gas customer disconnections by retailer from 2014/15 to 2019/20

		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	Number	14,530	15,044	14,970	13,161	12,125	11,234
	%	2.3	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.6
Kleenheat	Number	639	1,600	2,121	1,744	2,007	1,910
	%	1.3	1.8	1.4	0.9	1.0	0.9
Origin Energy	Number	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	48	95
	%	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.0	0.3	0.7
EGDC	Number	15	5	6	8	12	8
	%	4.3	1.5	1.8	2.4	3.8	2.5
Simply Energy	Number	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	8	180
	%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.1	0.8
Total	Number	15,184	16,649	17,097	14,913	14,200	13,427
	%	2.25	2.38	2.41	2.07	1.95	1.83

⁶⁸ AGL and Perth Energy did not disconnect any residential customers and have been excluded from Table 26.

5.6 Gas business disconnections

Table 27 shows the number and percentage of business gas customer disconnections by retailer.⁶⁹

Table 27: Number and percentage of business gas customer disconnections by retailer from 2014/15 to 2019/20

		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	Number	154	201	177	147	117	80
	%	1.9	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.0	1.4
Synergy	Number	3	1	1	0	0	0
	%	2.8	0.7	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Kleenheat	Number	9	42	82	30	26	37
	%	1.0	2.7	4.3	1.4	1.1	1.4
EGDC	Number	0	0	0	0	1	1
	%	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	2.7
Total	Number	166	244	260	177	144	118
	%	1.82	2.43	2.66	1.85	1.52	1.23

5.7 Inter-jurisdictional comparison of residential electricity and gas disconnections

Table 28 compares the residential electricity and gas disconnection percentages in Western Australia with the percentages in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.

All jurisdictions put a hold on disconnections due to COVID-19. The Australian Energy Regulator released a Statement of Expectations of energy businesses in March 2020 to protect customers. This statement included a hold on disconnections for residential customers, currently until 31 March 2021.⁷⁰ In Victoria, disconnections for non-payment ceased from mid-April 2020.⁷¹

For the past four years, Western Australian residential electricity disconnection percentages have been the highest of the four jurisdictions. The residential gas disconnection percentage in Western Australia has been the highest of the four jurisdictions for all six years.

⁶⁹ AGL, Amanda Energy, Origin Energy, Perth Energy and Simply Energy did not disconnect any business customers and have been excluded from Table 27.

⁷⁰ Australian Energy Regulator, 2020, *AER Statement of Expectations of energy businesses: Protecting customers and the energy market during COVID-19*, ([online](#)) [accessed 1 Dec 2020]

⁷¹ Essential Services Commission 2020, *Victorian Energy Market Report 2019--20*, 30 November, ([online](#)) [accessed 1 Dec 2020].

Table 28: Jurisdictional comparison of residential electricity and gas disconnections 2015 to 2020 (%)⁷²

	New South Wales ⁷³	South Australia	Victoria ⁷⁴	Western Australia
Electricity				
2014/15	1.06	1.36	1.45	0.97
2015/16	0.99	1.39	1.34	0.96
2016/17	0.89	1.43	1.16	1.60
2017/18	1.03	1.37	1.34	1.91
2018/19	1.00	1.33	0.89	2.02
2019/20	0.56	0.88	0.69	1.43
Gas				
2014/15	0.62	1.12	1.20	2.25
2015/16	0.51	1.23	1.28	2.38
2016/17	0.43	0.87	0.91	2.41
2017/18	0.39	1.03	1.11	2.07
2018/19	0.30	0.83	0.69	1.95
2019/20	0.22	0.51	0.42	1.83

⁷² The figures from South Australia and New South Wales are from the 2019/20 AER report and some have been amended from previous reports.

⁷³ New South Wales and South Australia data from: Australian Energy Regulator, 2020, *AER Annual Retail Markets Report 2019-20 – Charts and Tables*, ([online](#)) [accessed 1 Dec 2020].

⁷⁴ Essential Services Commission 2020, *Victorian Energy Market Report 2019--20*, 30 November, ([online](#)) [accessed 1 Dec 2020].

6. Reconnections

Main points

- The disconnection moratorium announced in March 2020 by the State Government reduced the number of customers disconnected, which in turn reduced the number of reconnections.
- The percentage of residential disconnections that were reconnected in 2019/20 was 42.3 per cent for Synergy customers and 99.3 per cent for Horizon Power customers.

Reconnection indicators apply only to the reconnection of a customer in the same name and at the same address as the disconnection. The total number of reconnections each year helps to identify customers who were not reconnected at all.⁷⁵

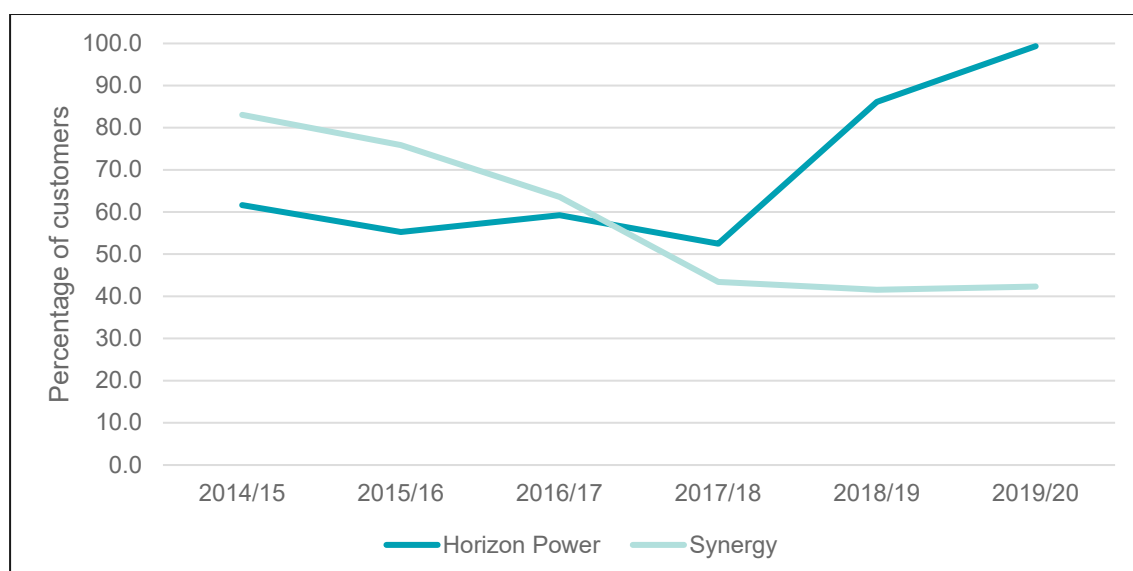
6.1 Residential electricity reconnections

Figure 12 shows the percentage of residential electricity customer disconnections that were reconnected by retailers.

Horizon Power's reconnection percentage (99.3 per cent) in 2019/20 was the highest in the six years reported. The large increase in reconnections reported by Horizon Power in 2018/19 was mostly due to it previously reporting the number of customers who were reconnected, instead of the total number of times customers had been reconnected.

Synergy's reconnection percentage of 42.3 per cent in 2019/20 is similar to the levels reported for the past three years.

Figure 12: Residential electricity customer disconnections that were reconnected by retailer between 2014/15 to 2019/20 (%)



⁷⁵ A proportion of disconnections involve customers who reconnect in a different name at the same address, often because another member of the household takes over the account from the person who was disconnected. These reconnections do not show up in the reconnections data, even though supply has been restored to the premise.

6.2 Business electricity reconnections

Table 29 shows the percentage of electricity business customer disconnections that were reconnected by retailer.

Synergy's business reconnection percentage has trended downwards over the past five years reporting period to reach a low of 29.6 per cent in 2019/20.

Table 29: Business electricity customer disconnections that were reconnected by retailer 2014 to 2020 (%)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	100.0	66.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Amanda Energy	n/a	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0
Horizon Power	31.7	60.9	66.7	74.2	78.0	87.5
Kleenheat	n/a	n/a	0.0	0.0	33.3	0.0
Perth Energy	100.0	100.0	100.0	33.3	72.2	51.7
Synergy	78.4	64.4	51.7	35.1	33.5	29.6

6.3 Gas residential reconnections

Table 30 shows the percentage of residential gas customer disconnections that were reconnected by each retailer.⁷⁶

Table 30: Gas residential customer disconnections that were reconnected by retailer 2015 to 2020 (%)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	68.1	70.1	66.0	66.7	66.7	73.1
Kleenheat	53.2	47.3	62.1	76.8	53.5	52.7
Origin Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.0	31.3	32.6
EGDC	66.7	80.0	16.7	75.0	50.0	75.0
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	50.0	54.4

6.4 Gas business reconnections

Table 31 shows the percentage of business gas customer disconnections reconnected by each retailer.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ AGL and Perth Energy have been excluded from Table 31 because they did not perform any reconnections over the past six years.

⁷⁷ AGL, Amanda Energy, Origin Energy, Perth Energy and Simply Energy have been excluded from Table 32 because they did not perform any reconnections over the past six years.

Table 31: Gas business customer disconnections that were reconnected by retailer 2015 to 2020 (%)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	72.1	60.7	59.3	53.7	55.6	36.3
Synergy	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Kleenheat	33.3	69.0	93.9	56.7	42.3	32.4
EGDC	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0

7. Customer service

Main points

- Complaints from residential electricity customers increased in 2019/20.
- Most complaints from electricity and gas customers during 2019/20 were about billing, continuing the trend seen in previous reporting years.
- Several retailers reported a reduction in call centre performance. This was attributed to moving staff to working from home arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions.

This chapter looks at how well retailers are servicing their customers, measured by customer complaints and call centre responsiveness.

Retailers are required to have an internal process for handling complaints that complies with Australian Standard AS/NZS 10002-2014 (Guidelines for complaint management in organisations). The standard defines a complaint as “an expression of dissatisfaction made to an organisation, related to its products, or the complaints-handling process itself, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected.”⁷⁸

Retailers are also required to comply with the ERA’s customer complaints guidelines, which clarify the distinction between queries, complaints and other customer communications.⁷⁹

Customer complaints are separated into four categories: billing complaints, marketing complaints, transfer complaints and other complaints.⁸⁰

A large proportion of customer interactions with their retailer is by telephone. Retailer responsiveness to telephone calls is an important measure of customer service.

Larger retailers operate call centres to handle customer enquiries and complaints. These call centres may have sophisticated systems to monitor and report on their performance.⁸¹ A key responsiveness indicator widely used for call centres in all sectors is the percentage of calls answered within 30 seconds.

Smaller retailers offer a simpler telephone service, which is often based on the customer calling a switchboard operator, who connects them to the appropriate contact person. This type of telephone service is generally not capable of recording responsiveness data.

⁷⁸ The ERA has slightly modified this definition by adding the words “or services” immediately after “products” because energy retailers provide a service rather than a product to their customers.

⁷⁹ A copy of the guidelines is available on the ERA [website](#).

⁸⁰ Refer to section 4.5 of the Handbook for definitions.

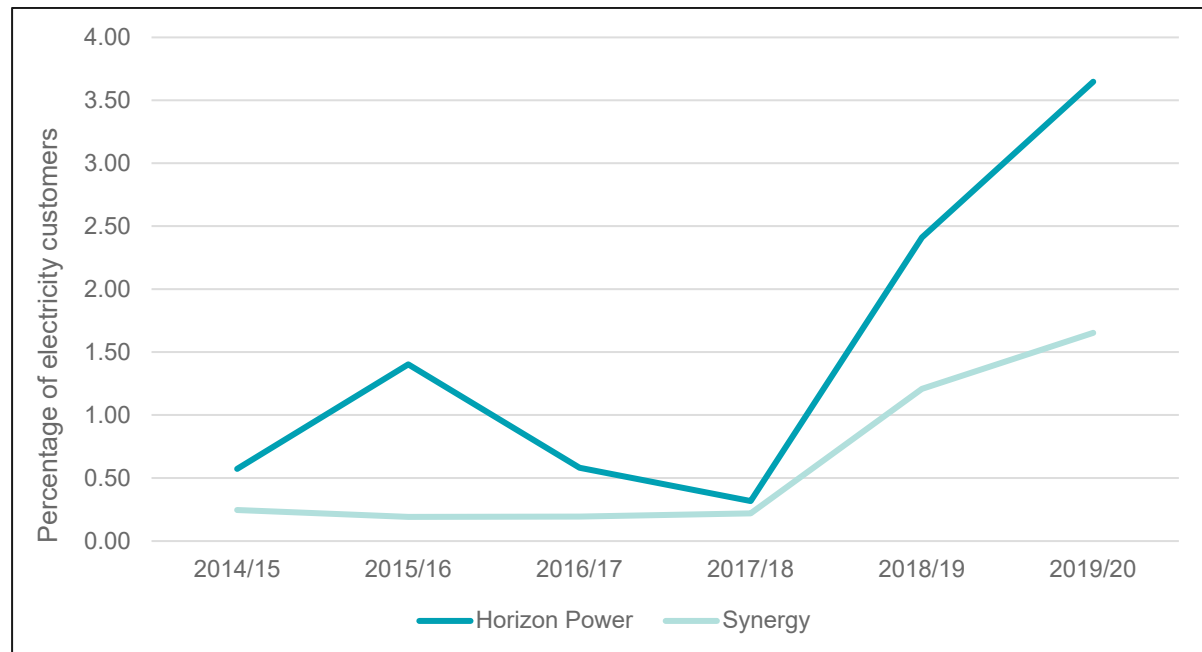
⁸¹ Some call centres handle calls about gas and electricity retail services, as well as other services provided by the retailer or a related business. Therefore, it is not always possible for retailers to separately report on their performance for gas and electricity retail calls. In these circumstances the reported performance will be for all the calls handled by the call centre.

7.1 Customer complaints

7.1.1 Residential electricity customer complaints

Figure 13 shows the total number of complaints, as a percentage of total residential customers, made to electricity retailers.

Figure 13: Complaints from residential electricity customers by retailer 2014 to 2020 (%)⁸²



7.1.2 Business electricity customer complaints

Table 32 shows the total number of complaints, as a percentage of total business customers, made to electricity retailers.⁸³

⁸² In 2018/19 Synergy and Horizon Power both changed the way they recorded complaints. In previous years, complaints that were resolved at the first point of contact were not reported. In addition, in 2019/20 Horizon Power added additional ways for customers to make complaints.

⁸³ AER Retail, A-Star and Clear Energy have been excluded from Table 32 because they did not report any business customer complaints for the past six years.

Table 32: Complaints from business electricity customers by retailer (%)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19 ⁸⁴	2019/20
Alinta Energy	1.0	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1
Amanda Energy	n/a	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Change Energy	n/a	n/a	0.0	8.0	3.5	0.0
CleanTech	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.0	1.6
Horizon Power	0.3	1.5	0.4	0.2	1.6	2.3
Kleenheat	n/a	3.6	1.4	0.0	0.8	4.1
Perth Energy	0.3	0.2	2.3	0.3	0.0	0.2
Rottnest Island Authority	3.8	0.0	4.2	4.2	0.0	0.0
Synergy	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.7

7.1.3 Residential and business electricity customer complaints by category

Table 33 compares residential and business electricity customer complaints by category for each retailer for the past two years.⁸⁵

Most of the complaints from residential and business customers were about billing.

Table 33: Residential and business electricity customer complaints by complaint category per retailer 2019 and 2020 (%)

	Billing		Marketing		Transfer		Other	
	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20
Residential								
Horizon Power	77.8	59.6	0.2	1.5	0.0	0.0	22.0	38.9
Synergy	83.2	81.0	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	16.7	18.9
Business								
Alinta Energy	60.0	66.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.0	33.3
CleanTech	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Horizon Power	70.9	67.3	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	29.1	32.2
Kleenheat	100.0	71.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	28.6
Perth Energy	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Synergy	84.4	80.6	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.6	14.9	18.3

⁸⁴ In 2018/19 Synergy and Horizon Power reported a much higher percentage of business customer complaints, because complaints resolved at the first point of contact were included for the first time.

⁸⁵ The Rottnest Island Authority has been excluded from Table 33 because it did not receive any complaints from business customers for the past two years.

7.1.4 Residential gas customer complaints

Table 34 shows the total number of complaints, as a percentage of total residential customers, made to gas retailers.⁸⁶

Table 34: Complaints from residential gas customers by retailer 2015 to 2020 (%)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.7	2.0	1.4
Alinta Energy	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.4
Kleenheat	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.2
Origin Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.3	1.3	0.8
EGDC	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.8	2.6

7.1.5 Business gas customer complaints

Table 35 shows the total number of complaints, as a percentage of total business customers, made to gas retailers.⁸⁷

Table 35: Complaints from business gas customers by retailer 2015 to 2020 (%)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	n/a	n/a	n/a	2.6	3.0	1.4
Alinta Energy	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.3
Synergy	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.7	1.2
Kleenheat	0.0	0.3	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.3
Origin Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	3.9	2.1	0.5
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.0	9.1

7.1.6 Residential and business gas customer complaints by category

Table 36 compares residential and business gas customer complaints by category per retailer for the past two years.

Most of the complaints from residential and business customers were about billing, followed by other complaints. For business customer complaints the exceptions were AGL and Synergy which did not receive any complaints about billing in 2019/20.

⁸⁶ Perth Energy has been excluded from Table 35 because it did not receive any residential customer complaints for the past six years.

⁸⁷ Amanda Energy, EGDC and Perth Energy have been excluded from Table 36 because they did not receive any business customer complaints for the past six years.

Table 36: Residential and business gas customer complaints by complaint category per retailer in 2018/19 and 2019/20 (%)

	Billing		Marketing		Transfer		Other	
	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20	2018/19	2019/20
Residential								
AGL	30.8	33.4	7.3	7.0	46.5	28.9	15.5	30.7
Alinta Energy	71.8	76.4	12.1	11.4	2.8	3.0	16.1	9.3
Kleenheat	65.4	66.1	1.0	2.1	4.9	7.5	28.8	24.3
Origin Energy	20.6	29.6	4.8	7.0	15.9	9.6	58.7	53.9
EGDC	100.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Simply Energy	43.0	34.3	43.1	26.1	13.8	3.2	26.5	36.5
Business								
AGL	31.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	56.3	57.1	12.5	42.9
Alinta Energy	95.2	85.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	15.0
Synergy	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	50.0
Kleenheat	73.3	66.7	0.0	0.0	6.7	11.1	20.0	22.2
Origin Energy	60.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.0	0.0
Simply Energy	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

7.2 Retailer call centre responsiveness

7.2.1 Electricity retailer call centre responsiveness

Table 37 shows the number of calls to electricity retailer call centres.

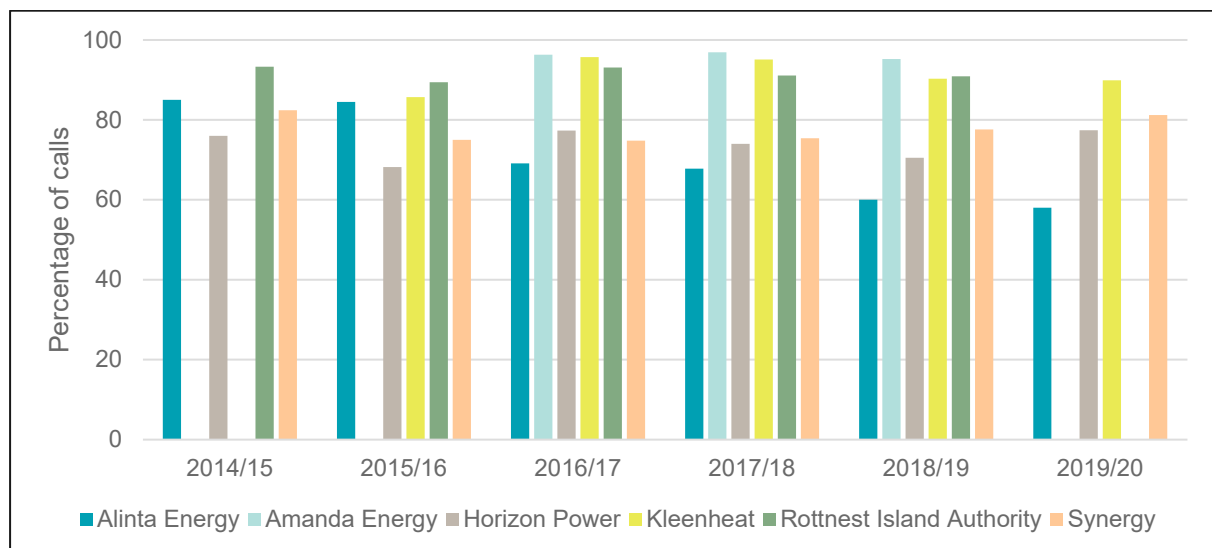
Table 37: Volume of calls to electricity retailer call centres 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Alinta Energy	3,342	2,997	1,412	1,355	1,410	4,570
Amanda Energy	n/a	n/a	1,959	1,653	1,945	n/a
Horizon Power ⁸⁸	95,203	108,497	83,761	81,159	73,180	65,079
Kleenheat	n/a	14	46	61	31	69
Rottnest Island Authority	5,250	1,955	814	852	33	n/a
Synergy	1,072,272	1,058,008	1,156,318	1,060,903	1,008,193	958,159
Total	1,176,067	1,171,471	1,244,310	1,145,983	1,084,792	1,027,877

In 2019/20 Amanda Energy and the Rottnest Island Authority made changes to their call centres that meant they were no longer able to record call centre statistics. Alinta Energy reported a 224 per cent increase in calls from its business electricity customers in 2019/20.⁸⁹

Figure 14 shows the percentage of calls to electricity retailer call centres answered within 30 seconds.

Figure 14: Calls from electricity customers answered within 30 seconds 2015 to 2020 (%)



⁸⁸ Horizon Power's call centre handles calls for both retail and distribution customers. Horizon Power has been unable to separate retail calls from distribution calls since 2014.

⁸⁹ Alinta advised that the increase was due to business customers calling to discuss billing and payment assistance options whilst their businesses were forced to close due to COVID-19.

7.3 Gas retailer call centre responsiveness

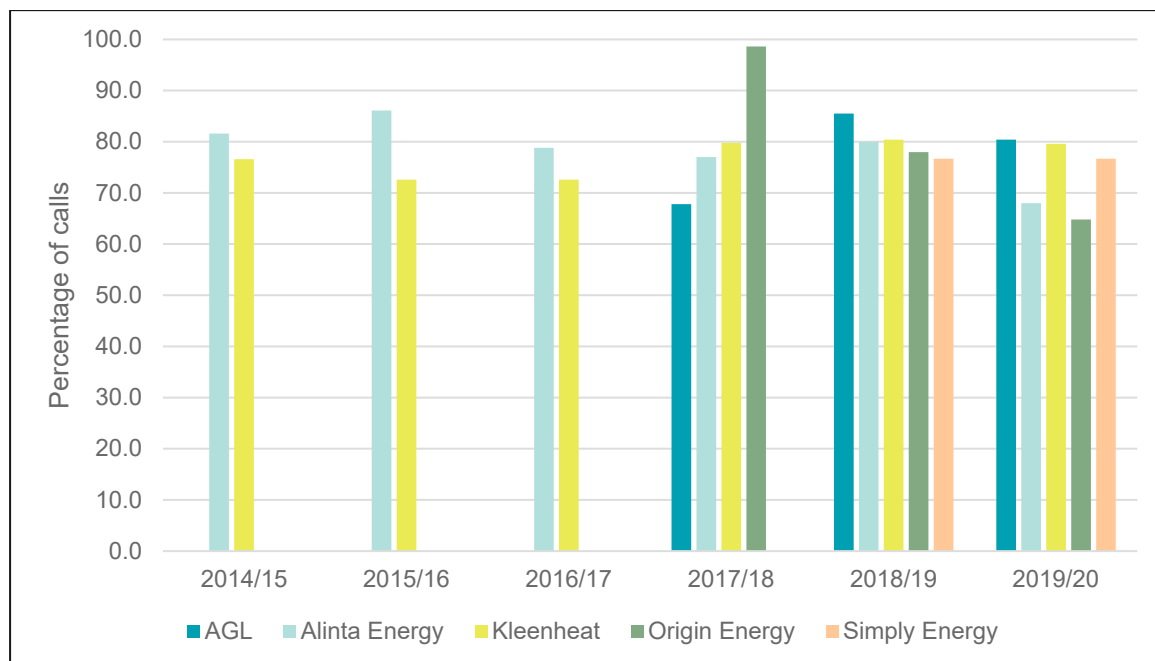
Table 38 shows the number of calls to gas retailer call centres.⁹⁰

Table 38: Volume of calls to gas retailer call centres 2015 to 2020

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
AGL	n/a	n/a	n/a	46,388	56,961	66,361
Alinta Energy	778,427	675,673	525,644	531,427	537,418	420,246
Kleenheat ⁹¹	233,363	222,505	285,887	310,803	289,778	246,101
Origin Energy ⁹²	n/a	n/a	n/a	18,518	34,319	27,466
Simply Energy	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	12,512	24,624
Total	1,011,790	898,178	811,531	907,136	921,523	784,798

Figure 15 shows the percentage of telephone calls to gas retailer call centres answered within 30 seconds.⁹³

Figure 15: Calls from gas customers answered within 30 seconds 2015 to 2020 (%)⁹⁴



⁹⁰ Amanda Energy, EGDC and Perth Energy have been excluded from Table 38 as they do not operate a dedicated call centre. AGL and Origin Energy commenced supplying customers in 2017/18 and Simply Energy commenced supplying customers in 2018/19.

⁹¹ The Kleenheat call centre handles calls for all areas of its business, including Liquefied Petroleum Gas customer calls.

⁹² Origin Energy provided updated figures for 2018/19.

⁹³ Amanda Energy, EGDC and Perth Energy have been excluded from Figure 16 as they do not operate a dedicated call centre.

⁹⁴ Origin Energy provided updated figures for 2018/19.

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