



01 OCT 2020

Dear

On 3 September 2020, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- *I would like to obtain information regarding Winter Energy Payment (WEP). Mainly, I am interested in:*
 - *The number of people opted out of WEP.*
 - *Grouped by year (from the inception of WEP to the most up-to-date information available)*
 - *Categorised by the primary benefit that qualified for WEP (i.e. NZ Super, Jobseeker's etc.)*
 - *A summary of reasons provided for opting out.*
 - *If one opted out of WEP, they wouldn't receive WEP until actively opted-in again?*
 - *Is it possible to have received WEP outside of the specified dates (May - September)?*

The WEP is a non-taxable benefit paid to people in receipt of a main benefit, New Zealand Superannuation (NZS) or Veteran's Pension (VP) to support their household heating costs during the winter period.

To receive the WEP a client must:

- be receiving a qualifying benefit (or portion of it) during the winter period. Qualifying benefits include Sole Parent Support, Supported Living Payment, Jobseeker Support, Jobseeker Support Student Hardship, Emergency Benefit, Emergency Maintenance Allowance, Youth Payment, Young Parent Payment, NZS and VP;
- be either the person granted a qualifying benefit or their partner, and the qualifying benefit (or portion of it) is paid to the client;
- not be disqualified from receiving the WEP;
- not have chosen to opt out of receiving the WEP; and
- be living in New Zealand, and not be outside of New Zealand during the period that the WEP can be paid for more than 28 days during any one or more absences.

With the exception of the Emergency Benefit, a client must have New Zealand Citizenship, permanent residence or hold a residence class visa to receive the above qualifying benefits for the WEP.

More information about the WEP can be found at this link: www.workandincome.govt.nz/map/income-support/extra-help/winter-energy-payment/index.html.

Clients do not have to apply for the WEP, it is automatically paid to those receiving a main benefit, NZS or VP and meet all other eligibility criteria.

Please note that during the 22-week WEP payment period this year, starting at 1 May 2020 and ceasing at 1 October 2020, the rates that were paid to New Zealanders were doubled. This was due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the New Zealand economy. Single people with no dependent children received \$40.91 each week, and couples and people with dependent children received \$63.64 each week.

Please find below a table showing the number of people who voluntarily opted out of receiving the WEP from the inception of the WEP benefit on 25 June 2018, as at 31 August 2020. The table shows a breakdown of the benefit groups that the persons were claiming when receiving the WEP.

The number of WEP opt-outs, broken down by benefit type from 25 June 2018 to 31 August 2020.

| Benefit Group | Number of Winter Energy Payment opt-outs | | |
|--|--|------------|------------|
| | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
| New Zealand Superannuation and Veteran's Pension | 1,705 | 669 | 809 |
| Emergency Maintenance Allowance | 0 | 0 | S |
| Sole Parent Support | S | S | S |
| Supported Living Payments related | 61 | 25 | 26 |
| Youth Payment and Young Parent Payment | S | 0 | S |
| Emergency Benefit | S | S | S |
| Job Seeker related | 41 | 19 | 53 |
| Total | 1,815 | 719 | 899 |

Notes:

- A client can 'Opt-Out' of the WEP payment any time before or during the payment period for various reasons.
- This is the number of people who have 'opted out' and were not regranted WEP.
- The release of data concerning lower numbers of persons may potentially lead to individuals being identified. Due to these privacy concerns, numbers for some categories of clients have been suppressed or aggregated.
- 'S' represents a suppressed cell to protect clients' privacy.

As noted above, information concerning smaller numbers of individuals is withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the Act, to protect the privacy of natural persons. The privacy interest of the individuals outweighs the public interest in the release of this information.

The Ministry does not require reasons to be given from person voluntarily opting out of receiving the WEP. Therefore, this part of your request is refused under section 18(e) of the Act, as the information requested does not exist.

You also asked the following questions, which I will respond to in turn.

- *If one opted out of WEP, they wouldn't receive WEP until actively opted-in again?*

If a person opted out of receiving the WEP then they would no longer receive payments until they decided to apply for the WEP again. The Ministry does not issue back payments for any time where the applicant had opted out of receiving a WEP.

- *Is it possible to have received WEP outside of the specified dates (May - September)?*

Under the Social Security Act 2018, the WEP is paid to people for a 22-week period only, starting at 1 May and ceasing at 1 October each year. The payments are seasonal as the winter months are when people require additional help with heating costs.

If someone requires additional assistance outside of this period the Ministry also provides recoverable and non-recoverable hardship payments to help people meet immediate and essential needs, such as the cost of power or gas. Further information about this financial assistance can be found at the following link:

<https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/eligibility/urgent-costs/index.html>

The principles and purposes of the Official Information Act 1982 under which you made your request are:

- to create greater openness and transparency about the plans, work and activities of the Government,
- to increase the ability of the public to participate in the making and administration of our laws and policies and
- to lead to greater accountability in the conduct of public affairs.

This Ministry fully supports those principles and purposes. The Ministry therefore intends to make the information contained in this letter available to the wider public. The Ministry will do this by publishing this letter on the Ministry of Social Development's website. Your personal details will be deleted, and the Ministry will not publish any information that would identify you as the person who requested the information.

If you wish to discuss this response with us, please feel free to contact OIA_Requests@msd.govt.nz.

If you are not satisfied with this response regarding WEP opt-outs, you have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or 0800 802 602.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bridget Saunders', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bridget Saunders
Manager Issue Resolution
Service Delivery