



03 DEC 2020

Dear

On 14 October 2020, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), information relating to Winter Energy Payments (WEP). For the sake of clarity your questions are addressed in turn:

- *I want to clarify further what you wrote about the additional assistance for energy bills beyond the WEP period: "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." I understood from your response:*

When someone receives additional assistance for energy costs outside of the 22-week WEP period by the Ministry (either recoverable and non-recoverable hardship payments), you meant the support for "urgent or unexpected living cost" with a specific intention for "power, gas, water bills or heating". Therefore, these payments would not be categorised as Winter Energy Payment. Please correct me if I misunderstood your response.

This is correct. The Ministry may be able to assist clients with an Advance Payment of Benefit or Recoverable Assistance Payment for power, gas, water and heating bills if a client has no other way to pay. This assistance can be paid in addition to the WEP, at any time during the year.

More information regarding who can get this payment and what the payments can be used for is provided on the Work and Income website at this link:

www.workandincome.govt.nz/eligibility/living-expenses/heating-and-power-bills.html#null.

Following this, could you please:

- 1. Provide a summary of how much has been paid out under the urgent or unexpected living cost assistance (regardless of WEP) to help people with their energy bills (electricity and gas, excluding water), categorised by benefit types (including non-recipients of primary benefits) and by years from 2015 to 2020.*
- 2. Is there any record on the amount of actual debt that the recipients of the Ministry's urgent or unexpected costs assistance (that is available up to \$200) have accumulated at the time of receiving the assistance?*
- 3. If so, can you please provide a summary, again categorised by benefit types nonrecipients of primary benefits) and by years from 2015 to 2020?*

In response to these questions, please see the following tables at appendix one of this letter:

- **Table One:** Number of Advances and Recoverable Assistant Payments for electricity and gas assistance between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.
- **Table Two:** Amount granted for Advances and Recoverable Assistant Payments for electricity and gas assistance between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.

4. We are also aware of situations in which the Ministry is the guarantor for a number of people's electricity/gas accounts. How many people have ever had the Ministry as the guarantor for their electricity/gas accounts?

5. How many people currently (at the time of your response) have the Ministry as the guarantor for their electricity/gas accounts?

The Ministry does not act as guarantor for clients with power companies, therefore there are currently no persons who have the Ministry as guarantor for their electricity or gas accounts. Accordingly, this part of your request is refused under section 18(e) of the Act, as the information requested does not exist.

However, you may be interested to know that the Ministry has an agreed referral process with power companies to refer vulnerable consumers to us for assistance. The Guidelines on Arrangements to Assist Low Income and Vulnerable Consumers places responsibility on power companies to identify vulnerable consumers and then consult with Work and Income prior to disconnecting their power supply. The guidelines also include measures to support medically dependent persons whose health could potentially be at risk in the event of a loss of power.

Once a power company has identified a vulnerable consumer, the company must investigate all possible payment options that will suit the consumer and allow them to pay their power bill. The company must go through this process before they refer clients to Work and Income (which may be at any time during first notice, overdue notice or disconnection notice).

More information on medically dependent and vulnerable customers can be found on the Electricity Authority website. The website also includes the guidelines used by power companies when providing assistance to medically dependent and vulnerable consumers. This information can be found at the following link: www.ea.govt.nz/operations/retail/retailers/retailer-obligations/medically-dependant-and-vulnerable-customers/.

6. How many people have ever had the payment arrangement in which the Ministry directly pays a portion of one's entitlement to the energy company for electricity/gas accounts?

7. How many people currently (at the time of your response) have the payment arrangement in which the Ministry directly pays a portion of one's entitlement to the energy company for electricity/gas accounts?

The Ministry is unable to provide you with this information as this information is not held centrally and is held within individual case files. In order to provide you with this information Ministry staff would have to manually review thousands of files. As such this part of your request is refused under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

8. The webpage on living expense related to heating and power bills mentions help with the cost of bedding, blankets, curtains or heaters. Can you please provide a summary of how much has been paid out (regardless of WEP) to help people keep their family warm? Please categorised the summary table in two ways:

- a. Categorised by primary benefit types (including non-recipients of primary benefits), and by years from 2015 to 2020.*
- b. Categorised by product types (bedding, blankets, curtains etc.) that the additional support was intended for, and by years from 2015 to 2020.*

The Ministry cannot provide data split by all product types. This is because it is not clear which product types are provided to keep a client warm, and the Ministry does not record payments made under a category such as 'warmth'. To go through all the hardship grants and identify what they were granted for, and then to make a determination on whether they relate to warmth would constitute as substantial collation and research in order to provide. Accordingly, this part of your request is refused under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

However, the Ministry has determined that the only payment type that could be provided and that could be determined to be for the purposes of warmth, would be bedding costs. Please see the following tables at appendix one in relation to bedding costs:

- **Table Three:** Number of hardship grants for bedding between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.
- **Table Four:** Amount granted for hardship grants for bedding between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.

Finally, we would like to see a summary of the disability allowance that has been paid to help with heating costs. Can you please:

9. Provide a summary of how much has been paid out to help with heating cost via disability allowance, categorised by years from 2015 to 2020

10. Provide a summary of how many people have received payments to assist with heating cost via disability allowance, categorised by years from 2015 to 2020

The Ministry cannot provide the total amount paid out to assist with heating costs via Disability Allowance, as the information is not recorded in a way that identifies which payments had heating costs included in them. To locate this information would constitute as substantial collation and research, and accordingly, is refused under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

The Ministry can however, provide the number of clients who have claimed Disability Allowance for power, gas and heating costs during each financial year since 2015. Please see the following table at appendix one:

- **Table Five:** Number of Disability Allowances and the weekly Disability Allowance costs claimed for power, gas and heating between 2014 and 2020.

In regard to the data released to you in table five, please note the Weekly Costs Claimed is recorded at the final week in June each financial year and corresponds to the count of clients at that point in time.

11. The average number of weeks paid (sum of all weeks paid out divided by the number of people received), categorised by each month and by years from 2015 to 2020.

The Ministry cannot provide the average number of weeks that a beneficiary has been receiving payments. To locate this information would constitute as substantial collation and research, and accordingly, is refused under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

More information on how Disability Allowance can be used to pay for power, gas and heating can be found on the Work and Income website at the following link: www.workandincome.govt.nz/eligibility/living-expenses/heating-and-power-bills.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 and any attached documents 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 to your request for information relating to Winter Energy Payments (WEP), 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 be 'Bridget Saunders', written in a cursive style.

Bridget Saunders
Manager, Issue Resolution
Service Delivery

Appendix One

Table One: Number of Advances and Recoverable Assistant Payments (RAP) granted for electricity and gas assistance between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.

Financial Year	Job Seeker Support	Supported Living Payment related	Sole Parent Support	Other main benefits	New Zealand Superannuation and Veteran's Pension	Orphan's Benefit and Unsupported Child's Benefit	Non-Beneficiary Assistance	No Benefit	Total Advances and RAPs
2014/2015	7,798	3,747	6,693	356	1,146	28	1,982	604	22,354
2015/2016	7,428	3,768	6,426	283	1,216	52	1,971	712	21,856
2016/2017	9,132	4,287	7,846	369	1,379	46	2,465	895	26,419
2017/2018	10,694	5,172	9,108	356	1,679	51	2,930	825	30,815
2018/2019	14,680	6,233	11,057	480	1,815	58	3,729	928	38,980
2019/2020	18,427	7,062	13,269	489	2,178	86	4,275	1,004	46,790

Notes:

- This table is a count of grants and not clients. Clients can have multiple grants within a year.
- 'No Benefit' is clients who are not receiving a main benefit or non-beneficiary assistance.
- Other main benefits include Emergency Maintenance Allowance, Emergency Benefit, Job Seeker Student Hardship, Youth Payment, and Young Parent Payment.

Table Two: Amount granted for Advances and Recoverable Assistant Payments (RAP) for electricity and gas assistance between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.

Financial Year	Job Seeker Support	Supported Living Payment related	Sole Parent Support	Other main benefits	New Zealand Superannuation and Veteran's Pension	Orphan's Benefit and Unsupported Child's Benefit	Non-Beneficiary Assistance	No Benefit	Total Advances and RAPs
2014/2015	\$3,117,690.22	\$1,542,343.44	\$3,312,839.03	\$143,877.30	\$552,526.49	\$14,352.74	\$862,368.76	\$266,934.08	\$9,812,932.06
2015/2016	\$3,195,421.54	\$1,664,107.68	\$3,488,221.80	\$131,417.60	\$608,319.30	\$26,993.57	\$924,856.84	\$366,372.42	\$10,405,710.75
2016/2017	\$3,892,370.59	\$1,836,712.61	\$3,884,624.53	\$164,713.42	\$675,544.79	\$24,118.25	\$1,111,407.78	\$458,844.08	\$12,048,336.05
2017/2018	\$4,203,464.07	\$2,181,410.77	\$4,280,517.88	\$156,584.42	\$771,094.59	\$26,877.88	\$1,333,706.16	\$405,531.79	\$13,359,187.56
2018/2019	\$5,377,143.14	\$2,475,536.54	\$4,963,743.96	\$173,438.39	\$860,277.94	\$32,544.58	\$1,627,068.45	\$443,184.68	\$15,952,937.68
2019/2020	\$6,406,952.74	\$2,618,513.42	\$5,558,131.52	\$185,534.32	\$935,173.61	\$39,404.61	\$1,749,501.50	\$449,768.10	\$17,942,979.82

- Table shows recorded value of grants over each financial year.
- 'No Benefit' is clients who are not receiving a main benefit or non-beneficiary assistance.
- Other main benefits include Emergency Maintenance Allowance, Emergency Benefit, Job Seeker Student Hardship, Youth Payment, and Young Parent Payment.

Table Three: Number of hardship grants for bedding between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and financial year.

Financial Year	Job Seeker Support	Supported Living Payment related	Sole Parent Support	Other main benefits	New Zealand Superannuation and Veteran's Pension	Orphan's Benefit and Unsupported Child's Benefit	Non-Beneficiary Assistance	No Benefit	Total hardship grants
2014/2015	750	478	500	105	61	27	38	11	1,970
2015/2016	952	547	682	118	96	16	51	14	2,476
2016/2017	1,446	662	837	165	99	29	67	15	3,320
2017/2018	2,112	906	1,252	157	140	28	135	30	4,760
2018/2019	4,912	1,574	2,580	228	238	60	192	39	9,823
2019/2020	9,885	2,615	4,689	315	380	81	363	42	18,370

Notes

- This table is a count of grants and not clients. Clients can have multiple grants within a year.
- Hardship grants include Special Needs Grants, Advances on Benefit, and Recoverable Assistance Payments.
- 'No Benefit' is clients who are not receiving a main benefit or non-beneficiary assistance.
- Other main benefits include Emergency Maintenance Allowance, Emergency Benefit, Job Seeker Student Hardship, Youth Payment, and Young Parent Payment.

Table Four: Amount granted for hardship grants for bedding between 2014 and 2020, broken down by benefit group and year.

Financial Year	Job Seeker Support	Supported Living Payment related	Sole Parent Support	Other main benefits	New Zealand Superannuation and Veteran's Pension	Orphan's Benefit and Unsupported Child's Benefit	Non-Beneficiary Assistance	No Benefit	Total hardship grants
2014/2015	\$103,813.25	\$63,181.58	\$76,174.89	\$12,411.34	\$8,565.80	\$5,252.09	\$4,556.82	\$1,341.90	\$275,297.67
2015/2016	\$127,941.92	\$70,558.66	\$115,093.45	\$13,996.92	\$13,353.22	\$2,532.82	\$7,667.54	\$2,697.47	\$353,842.00
2016/2017	\$202,872.58	\$97,004.69	\$143,115.68	\$18,431.32	\$17,789.30	\$3,580.48	\$9,081.93	\$2,245.95	\$494,121.93
2017/2018	\$290,041.42	\$128,498.67	\$213,005.00	\$21,740.38	\$21,037.14	\$4,130.27	\$18,353.55	\$3,842.90	\$700,649.33
2018/2019	\$750,023.05	\$240,242.24	\$482,614.97	\$35,404.24	\$38,406.97	\$12,534.06	\$25,991.01	\$5,146.24	\$1,590,362.78
2019/2020	\$1,486,577.12	\$393,377.55	\$869,953.35	\$45,246.62	\$62,502.21	\$13,467.35	\$53,712.13	\$6,112.47	\$2,930,948.80

- Table shows recorded value of grants over each financial year.
- Hardship grants include Special Needs Grants, Advances on Benefit, and Recoverable Assistance Payments.
- 'No Benefit' is clients who are not receiving a main benefit or non-beneficiary assistance.
- Other main benefits include Emergency Maintenance Allowance, Emergency Benefit, Job Seeker Student Hardship, Youth Payment, and Young Parent Payment.

Table Five: Number of Disability Allowances Paid and the weekly Disability Allowance costs claimed for power, gas and heating between 2014 and 2020.

Financial Year	Clients as at the end of each financial year	Disability Allowance weekly costs claimed
2014/2015	23,490	\$299,108.18
2015/2016	22,215	\$292,213.25
2016/2017	20,995	\$281,735.93
2017/2018	19,929	\$275,511.40
2018/2019	18,800	\$267,197.76
2019/2020	17,747	\$257,925.55

Notes:

- Costs can be claimed for Disability Allowance, those claimed weekly amounts may total more than the weekly maximum allowable Disability Allowance for a person.
- The Weekly Costs Claimed is recorded at the final week in June each financial year and corresponds to the count of clients at that time.