



29 November 2021

Tēnā koe

On 30 September 2021, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- 1) *What additional support was provided to rough sleepers and other homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2020?*
- 2) *What was the rationale for providing (or not) this additional support?*
- 3) *How much money was spent by MSD on additional support for homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2020?*
- 4) *What additional support was provided to rough sleepers and other homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2021?*
- 5) *How did the support provided differ from the previous level 4 lockdown?*
- 6) *What was the rationale for providing (or not) this additional support? If this support differed from 2020, what was the rationale for the different support?*
- 7) *How much money was spent by MSD on additional support for homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2021?*

On 15 October 2021, all of your questions were transferred in part to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). You can expect to receive a response from HUD in due course. However, MSD is providing a response to the extent your request refers to MSD.

Please find the response to your request below. Similar questions have been grouped together. Note, much of the assistance provided by MSD can be accessed by clients regardless of whether they are homeless. The below information also includes assistance that is generally available to clients who are eligible but may frequently be accessed by homeless people. We have also included assistance provided to New Zealanders who are at risk of becoming homeless.

- 1) *What additional support was provided to rough sleepers and other homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2020?*
- 2) *What was the rationale for providing (or not) this additional support?*

- 4) *What additional support was provided to rough sleepers and other homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2021?*
- 5) *How did the support provided differ from the previous level 4 lockdown?*
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Aotearoa/New Zealand Homelessness Action Plan

The *Aotearoa/New Zealand Homelessness Action Plan (2020-2023)* was published in February 2020 and sets out a balanced and comprehensive package of actions to address homelessness with an increased focus on prevention, alongside supply, support, and system enablers. This plan is led by HUD with other agencies and organisations taking action to support this initiative. A copy of the Action Plan can be found here: <https://www.hud.govt.nz/assets/Community-and-Public-Housing/Support-for-people-in-need/Homelessness-Action-Plan/271a3c7d79/Homelessness-Action-Plan.pdf>.

Food security and immediate needs

Demand for food has significantly increased for foodbanks since COVID-19 restrictions were implemented. In May 2020, the Government announced that MSD will invest \$32 million over two years to provide support for foodbanks, food rescue and other community organisations who are distributing food to people and whānau experiencing food insecurity. More information is available at: <https://www.msd.govt.nz/what-we-can-do/community/food-secure-communities/index.html>.

As you will be aware, clients can generally access Special Needs Grants for food and other immediate needs such as dental treatment if they are eligible. Special Needs Grants provide non-taxable, one-off recoverable or non-recoverable financial assistance. This assistance has continuously been available throughout the pandemic. More information is available at <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/products/a-z-benefits/special-needs-grant.html>.

Communities and Providers

MSD has expanded its work to support initiatives that support priority groups, which include Māori, Pacific and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. The Community Capability and Resilience Fund is a fund for initiatives that support the rebuild and recovery from COVID-19. The \$36 million fund became available on 1 August 2020 to support communities over a two-year period. More information is available at: <https://www.msd.govt.nz/what-we-can-do/community/community-capability-and-resilience-fund/index.html>.

Furthermore, as part of the COVID-19 Budget package, MSD was allocated funding to invest in the capability and resilience of providers, so they can be safe, sustainable, and strong in the recovery from COVID-19. The Building Provider Capability and Resilience Fund aims to ensure providers can continue to deliver necessary services to support their communities in responding to and then recovering from the impacts of COVID-19. More information can be accessed at: <https://www.msd.govt.nz/what-we-can-do/community/building-provider-capability-and-resilience-fund/index.html>.

Wage Subsidy

As you will be aware, throughout the pandemic, MSD has provided assistance to employers through the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS), to ensure employers can keep their employees, which prevents job loss and potential homelessness as a result. The WSS has been available since late March 2020 and covered different periods and geographical locations. More background information about the latest schemes is available here:

- August 2021 scheme: <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/covid-19/wage-subsidy/index.html>.
- March 2021 scheme: <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/covid-19/wage-subsidy-march-2021/index.html>
- Resurgence Wage Subsidy: <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/covid-19/resurgence-wage-subsidy/index.html>
- Wage Subsidy Extension: <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/covid-19/wage-subsidy-extension/index.html>

Housing assistance

MSD supports those who are at risk of losing their accommodation:

- **Emergency Housing:** MSD can assist people who require Emergency Housing, or to relocate elsewhere (for example, staying with friends or family or in different short-term options). Emergency Housing Special Needs Grants (EH SNGs) are only able to be used as a last resort, so if an opportunity for alternative accommodation is available, even for a short time, people are encouraged to take this.

MSD assists those staying in Emergency Housing to find suitable, sustainable accommodation. Once they have secured suitable accommodation, MSD offers supports and products to help them maintain their tenancies and minimise the risk of returning to Emergency Housing in the future. This includes assistance with income or employment, so that the household has enough to meet their accommodation and essential living costs. MSD can also assist with rent arrears if required. The level and nature of further support once a family or individual has left Emergency Housing depends on the individual circumstances of the client.

Housing Brokers within MSD help clients in Emergency Housing or on the Housing Register to overcome any perceived barriers by increasing connections and confidence with local landlords, property managers and the private rental market. They also match clients with suitable housing.

- **Sustaining Tenancies:** The Sustaining Tenancies initiative is part of the Government's Aotearoa/New Zealand Homelessness Action Plan (2020-2023) referred to above and is available to help people maintain and sustain their existing tenancies. The initiative is contracted by HUD. Sustaining Tenancies helps to prevent homelessness by funding community-based services to support individuals, families and whānau who need assistance to address issues putting their tenancy at risk. You can find information about accessing Sustaining Tenancies in your region at this weblink: www.hud.govt.nz/community-and-public-housing/addressing-homelessness/sustaining-tenancies/accessing-sustaining-tenancies/.
- **Ready to Rent:** MSD also funds a training course called Ready to Rent. These courses are run by community organisations and help equip clients in emergency or insecure housing with the skills and confidence to gain and sustain private rental housing.

Under Alert Level 4, MSD made a number of changes to its housing services in order to comply with lockdown restrictions, ensure that people have accommodation where they can safely self-isolate, and to allow MSD to focus its resources on supporting those whose income and employment has been affected by COVID-19. These steps included:

- Longer Emergency Housing Special Needs Grants (EH SNG's) national directive:

- From Monday 30 March 2020, MSD has been able to issue EH SNG's for up to 21 nights for clients who have been in emergency housing for more than seven nights. Clients will still need to meet the usual eligibility criteria for emergency housing.
 - There was no need to extend grant periods during the August 2021 lockdown as the welfare programme was amended following the 2020 programme to provide for the issuing of EH SNGs for 21 nights.
- Emergency housing contribution deferred
 - In 2020, MSD deferred implementation of the emergency housing client contribution (25% of the client's assessable income) to avoid creating financial hardship for clients self-isolating in emergency accommodation. The contribution was implemented in October 2020 and remained in effect throughout the 2021 lockdowns, i.e., clients were not exempted from paying the contribution in order to maintain equity with Public and Transitional Housing tenants.
- Transitional housing contributions now an allowable cost for Special Benefit and Temporary Additional Support (TAS)
 - From Monday 30 March 2020, the contributions that clients make towards their transitional housing costs (25% of their weekly income) have been an allowable cost for Temporary Additional Support and Special Benefit.
 - This was a wider policy change to TAS that remains in place. Therefore, it did not need to be replicated for the 2021 lockdowns.
- Pause on register management (outbound) calling
 - In order to focus resources on delivering critical COVID-19 support to affected people, from the March/April 2020 lockdown onwards, MSD paused register management (outbound) calling to applicants on the Public Housing Register. Outbound calls were used to ask clients whether their circumstances have changed, which may affect their housing priority rating. Where clients proactively contacted MSD about a change in circumstances, MSD noted those changes to ensure those people were not disadvantaged.
 - MSD recommenced register management (outbound) calling in the second quarter of 2021 and this continued throughout the August 2021 lockdown. Note, register management ensures MSD understands applicants' current living situations, so MSD prioritise clients with the most urgent needs.
- Public housing assessments were stopped
 - During the 2020 lockdown MSD paused Public Housing assessment activity in order to free up contact centre resource to deliver immediate assistance to people impacted by COVID-19, including the delivery of the wage subsidy.
 - Increased resourcing and changes to MSD's frontline business model allowed MSD to continue to deliver phone-based Public Housing assessments throughout the August 2021 lockdown. While placement activity by Public Housing providers was paused at Alert Level 4, the continuation of assessments has allowed MSD to confirm eligibility and priority so applicants are able to be placed when the Alert Levels allow – generally at Level 3 and below in accordance with Public Health guidelines.
- Public housing tenancy reviews paused until further notice
 - Public housing tenancy reviews ensure that people still need public housing and that their current house continues to meet their needs. MSD paused all public housing tenancy reviews during the 2020 Alert Level 4 lockdown to avoid creating uncertainty or anxiety for tenants.
 - Public Housing Tenancy reviews have remained paused since the March/April 2020 lockdown pending further policy advice to Ministers.

- Fast track Income Related Rent (IRR) reviews due to income decreases related to COVID-19
 - During the March/April 2020 lockdown, MSD established an expedited process to ensure that public housing tenants whose income has been impacted by COVID-19 are quickly re-assessed to ensure their rent reflects their current circumstances. Normally, a change in circumstances would need to last for eight weeks or longer before MSD can make this change, but MSD provided increased discretion to staff in order to minimise anxiety for affected public housing tenants.
 - MSD again provided fast-track IRR reviews for public housing tenants whose income had declined due to the August 2021 COVID-19 lockdown. This service remains in operation while Auckland and other parts of the country remain at level two.
 - Annual IRR reviews stopped until further notice
 - In March 2020, along with other annual reviews, MSD paused annual reviews of IRR until further notice in line with the Government's six-month rent freeze (26 March - 26 September 2020). This ensured no-one living in public housing received a rent increase during this period.
 - Cabinet did not implement a rent freeze during the August 2021 lockdown, so IRR annual reviews continued as normal, but with discretion to take into account changes in income resulting from COVID-19, as noted above.
 - The Government response to the need for support in Auckland during the latest COVID lockdown has included committing a further \$10 million to help people access ongoing food and other essential items. This was specifically targeted at the Auckland region, helping providers and organisations to distribute over 50,000 more food parcels and 20,000 essential wellbeing packs. MSD will continue to work with key agencies across the system to ensure that support is coordinated and targeted to areas and populations with the greatest need.
- 3) *How much money was spent by MSD on additional support for homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2020?*
- 7) *How much money was spent by MSD on additional support for homeless people in response to the level 4 lockdown in 2021?*

Homeless clients are in need of various types of assistance, such as housing, food, or medical services. MSD is unable to provide the amount spent on additional support for homeless clients as a consequence of the COVID-19 Alert Level 4 lockdowns as figures would be held in notes on individual case files. Ministry staff would have to manually review thousands of client files to assess whether assistance provided to a client (e.g., a food grant) relates to the client's homelessness, and to confirm whether the assistance provided relates to an Alert Level 4 lockdown in 2020 or 2021. 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.

MSD has considered whether it would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. MSD has concluded that, in either case, its ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

The principles and purposes of the Act 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. MSD therefore intends to make the information contained in this letter and any attached documents available to the wider public. MSD will do this by publishing this letter on MSD of Social Development's website. Your personal details will be deleted, and MSD 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, 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.

Nāku noa, nā



Karen Hocking
**General Manager
Housing**