



30 MAR 2020

Dear [REDACTED]

On 2 March 2020, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- *All advice received by the Minister since January 2019 about increasing benefit levels.*

The Ministry has considered whether this request should be transferred to the Minister for Social Development (the Minister). The Minister's office has advised, however, that they have not received any information other than that considered in this response.

In May 2018, the Government established the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG) to provide advice regarding the overhaul of the welfare system. This advice was delivered in February 2019.

The WEAG's final report, Whakamana Tāngata, made a number of recommendations for changes to the welfare system, including increasing main benefit rates and indexing benefits to wage growth, instead of inflation. Whakamana Tāngata is publicly available on the WEAG's website here: www.weag.govt.nz/weag-report/whakamana-tangata/.

As part of Budget 2019, the Government partially implemented one of the WEAG's recommendations by amending the indexation of main benefits. Previously, benefits were indexed to changes in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is a measure of inflation. Following Budget 2019, main benefits are indexed to wage growth. As a result of this change, main benefits will increase by over three percent on 1 April 2020. This is the largest increase in over nine years outside of one-off changes.

The Ministry intends to proactively release the advice provided to Hon Carmel Sepuloni, Minister for Social Development regarding this increase. As such, this part of your request is refused under section 18(d) of the Act as the information requested will soon be made publicly available.

In addition, on 17 March 2020, the Government announced that as part of the response to COVID-19, the Winter Energy Payment will be doubled for 2020, and benefit rates will be permanently increased by \$25 per week. Information regarding the Government's response to COVID-19 will also be proactively released and as such this information is also withheld under section 18(d) of the Act.

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Further advice regarding the recommendations of the WEAG, including main benefit rates, remains under active consideration. As such, this information is withheld under section 9(2)(f)(iv) of the Act. The release of this information at this time would be likely to prejudice the ability of the Government to consider advice and the wider public interest of effective government would not be served.

Information regarding the Government's welfare overhaul work programme, including as it relates to the recommendations contained in Whakamana Tāngata, is outlined in the Cabinet paper '*Welfare Overhaul: Update on Progress and Long-Term Plan*'. This paper is publicly available on the Ministry's website here: www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/information-releases/welfare-overhaul-update-on-progress-and-long-term-plan.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 advice about increasing benefit levels, 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



Polly Vowles
Policy Manager, Income Support Policy