



23 OCT 2020

Dear

On 29 September 2020, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- *The total number of grants given by the Ministry for Special Needs Grants for Dental care for the years 2019 - current*
- *The total amount of money paid for Special Needs Grants for dental care by the Ministry for the years 2019 - current*
- *The total amount of recoverable debt owed to the Ministry for Special Needs Grants for dental care for the years 2019 - current*
- *Can you please break this information down according to ethnicity, gender, age and region?*

The Ministry provides recoverable and non-recoverable financial assistance to people to meet an immediate need for essential items such as food, health costs (including medical and dental costs), power and other costs. These payments are available to any person as long as they meet an income and asset test, and they are unable to meet the cost from any other source.

The Ministry recognises that individuals who are in receipt of a benefit may not be able to budget for unexpected dental costs, and support is available for those who meet the criteria to help with the cost of dental work.

All dental treatments funded through the Ministry must be provided by a health agency or registered dental practitioner. Examples of a qualifying dental situation include, but are not limited to, root treatment, tooth extraction, tooth restoration and treatment of acute infection.

The maximum amount payable to a person applying for a non-recoverable Special Needs Grant towards the cost of dental treatment is \$300 within any 52-week period. Where exceptional circumstances apply, this amount may be exceeded, or more than one payment may be made. In situations where there are no exceptional circumstances, or where individuals do not meet the qualifying criteria for a Special Needs Grant, they may qualify for an Advance Payment of Benefit to meet any or all remaining costs.

Repayment arrangements for recoverable assistance are agreed at the outset, taking a client's individual circumstances and financial situation into account.

When debt is established, the Ministry knows whether that debt is the result of recoverable assistance, an overpayment or fraud. However, as a person transfers on and off certain benefits and grants, the debt balances are consolidated into a single debt amount, therefore, the Ministry cannot accurately distinguish the reason for the debt.

Consequently, the Ministry cannot address your request for the total amount of debt owed to the Ministry for recoverable dental grants. Your request for this information is refused under section 18(f) of the Act, as in order to provide you with this information, Ministry staff would have to manually review hundreds of thousands of client files. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

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

While we are not able to respond to your request regarding the total amount of recoverable debt owed to the Ministry for Special Needs Grants for dental care, we have enclosed four tables in an attached Excel spreadsheet which will serve to answer the remainder of your request:

- **Table One:** The number and amount of recoverable and non-recoverable emergency dental hardship grants for the quarters ending March 2019 to September 2020, broken down by age
- **Table Two:** The number and amount of recoverable and non-recoverable emergency dental hardship grants for the quarters ending March 2019 to September 2020, broken down by ethnicity
- **Table Three:** The number and amount of recoverable and non-recoverable emergency dental hardship grants for the quarters ending March 2019 to September 2020, broken down by gender
- **Table Four:** The number and amount of recoverable and non-recoverable emergency dental hardship grants for the quarters ending March 2019 to September 2020, broken down by region

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
- to lead to greater accountability in the conduct of public affairs.

Please note that a small number of figures are suppressed and are represented by an 'S' in order to protect client privacy. The Ministry is unable to provide you with the exact numbers as releasing this information is likely to risk identifying the individuals concerned. As such, this information is withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the Act. The need to protect the privacy of these individuals outweighs any public interest in this information.

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 and attachments 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 Special Needs Grants for dental care, 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



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**Manager, Issue Resolution
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