

Dear

On 1 August 2021, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- *How many MSD clients (all types) have been stuck in Australia in the lockdowns since the bubble opened?*
- *How many has MSD stopped paying as a result?*
- *How long is a beneficiary allowed to be overseas before their payments are stopped?*

Information on clients currently overseas, including which country they are in, is held on each person's individual client file. The information we hold centrally, on current payments of benefits and pensions to clients overseas, is not broken down by country. Similarly, centrally held information doesn't record whether people are unwillingly stuck somewhere longer than expected or are there voluntarily.

As a result I am unable to provide you with this information, as retrieving this information from individual client files would involve substantial collation. As such, questions one and two regarding clients stranded in Australia are 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.

Regarding question three of your request, in accordance with section 140 of the Social Security Regulations 2018, benefits aren't payable while clients are overseas. However, there are exceptions, including the 4-week rule, covered in section 142 and onwards of the Social Security Regulations 2018 which outlines:

For payment up to 28 days:

- Beneficiaries receiving a qualifying main benefit can continue to have their benefit paid for up to 28 days in a 52-week period while overseas, on the following conditions:
 - as long as they notify the Ministry of their departure.
 - benefit would be paid if it weren't for client's absence, and
 - the client's absence doesn't affect their eligibility

For payment over 28 days:

- The Ministry can continue to make payments over the above 28 day period at discretion, if:
 - The Ministry has been notified of the client's overseas absence and approved the reason for travel
 - The client can't return home due to unforeseen circumstances out of their control that couldn't be prevented

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.

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 regarding clients stranded in Australia since the travel bubble opened, 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

Bridget Saunders

Bridget Saunders
**Manager, Issue Resolution
Service Delivery**