



18 September 2024

Tēnā koe

### **Official Information Act Request**

Thank you for your email of 21 August 2024, requesting information on whether there ever a visual acuity definition of "blind" in the Social Security Act. I have considered your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act). Please find my decision on your request set out below.

#### ***Was there ever a visual acuity definition of "blind" in the Social Security Act?***

Neither the Social Security Act 2018 (the SSA) nor the Social Security Act 1964 mentions visual acuity.

#### ***General information on visual acuity.***

Provisions in the SSA give preferential treatment to people who are totally blind, compared with the treatment of other people with other forms of disability or health condition. The provisions include:

- *Automatic eligibility to benefit* – A totally blind person can be granted Supported Living Payment (SLP) without having to establish that they are permanently and severely limited in their capacity to work. All other people can only access SLP if they have proven this limited capacity to work.
- *No 'hours of work' test* – Under the criteria for being severely limited in capacity for work, people who are able to regularly work 15 hours a week or more in open employment are not eligible for SLP except if they are totally blind. There will be some SLP recipients who are totally blind and working full time.
- *Additional income exception* – SLP clients can have \$20 of personal income exempt, from the income test, with a further discretionary exemption for clients with "severe disablement". Totally blind clients have all personal income exempt, so they can still receive a full rate of benefit despite receiving high wages or salary.

- *Blind subsidy* – An additional allowance of 25 percent of their average earnings can be paid to a totally blind person who is receiving SLP (though there is a limit on the total income that can attract this allowance). There are no provisions similar to the blind subsidy for other severely disabled clients.

Under the SSA, to qualify for SLP due to total blindness clients must undergo an assessment. While the SSA does not define what constitutes total blindness, operational guidance states clients must undergo an assessment. The assessment must identify the client meets one or both of the following criteria:

- The best visual acuity (sharpness), with correcting lenses, does not exceed 3/60 or 1/20 and/or
- State that the visual field is contracted to a maximum of five degrees on either side of the fixation point.

People who do meet these criteria may be eligible for other financial assistance.

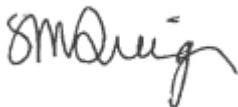
The welfare system has provided financial assistance to people who are totally blind for many years. Blind Pensions and Blind Subsidy were introduced in 1924. The Blind Pension was only available to those who were completely and permanently incapacitated by blindness. The Invalids Benefit replaced the Blind Pension that had been available since 1924. The benefit was provided to those who met a means test and a medical test (permanent incapacity for work or total blindness). The Invalids Benefit was later replaced by the Supported Living Payment.

I will be publishing this decision letter, with your personal details removed, on the Ministry's website in due course.

If you wish to discuss this response with us, please feel free to contact [OIA\\_Requests@msd.govt.nz](mailto:OIA_Requests@msd.govt.nz).

If you are not satisfied with my decision on your request, 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](http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz) or 0800 802 602.

Ngā mihi nui



pp.

Magnus O'Neill

**General Manager  
Ministerial and Executive Services**