

Freedom of Information request 3134/2013

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Information request

- 1. How many numbers of people of pensionable age who receive a UK state pension but live in Ireland have qualified for the new annual winter fuel allowance from HMG?*
- 2. What is the total cost to the British government in the payments that have been made to residents in Ireland and were received by them last month?*
- 3. Given what I have been told is the huge demand by the March 31st deadline, at what cost did the DWP have to employ extra staff to process the claims?*

DWP response

The Department is not able to provide information on the number and cost of Winter Fuel Payments paid to residents of Ireland. Winter Fuel Payment statistics are published annually. Statistics for winter 2011/12 can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/winter-fuel-payments-by-eea-country> Information on the number of Winter Fuel Payments made for winter 2012/13, including a breakdown by country, are due to be published in September 2013. As the statistics relating to the number of people getting a Winter Fuel Payment are intended for future publication this information is exempt from disclosure under Section 22 (Information intended for future publication) of the Freedom of Information Act. This exemption is qualified, and is therefore subject to a public interest test. The public interest test is where the Department considers whether the balance of the public interest falls in favour of withholding or disclosing the information requested.

There are public interest arguments in favour of disclosure of this information at the present time. Disclosure would for example improve transparency in the operations of the Department.

There are public interest arguments against disclosure of this information at the present time. These arguments include that until a full sample of data is available the results will be skewed and misleading. Also it is in the public interest to adhere to the existing publication process for official statistics, which includes time for the data to be collated and properly verified.

It is in the public interest to ensure that the publication of official information is a properly planned and managed process, to ensure that the data are accurate once placed into the public domain. And it is in the public interest to ensure that the information is available to all members of the public at the same time; premature publication could undermine the principle of making the information available to all at the same time through the official publication process.

On this occasion, the balance of the public interest test falls in favour of withholding this information. As I have explained above, statistics on this issue will be published later this year.

You asked about the staff costs of processing claims. This Department allocates staff resources based on workload forecasts which would have taken into account that claims from the European Economic Area (EEA) were expected to increase in winter 2012/13 following the European Court judgment in the Stewart case.

The International Future & Specialist Pension Centre (IFSPC), which is responsible for claims to Winter Fuel Payments, State Pension and other working age benefits from EEA residents, manages its allocated resource to deal with surges in work as part of its normal business and planning function. No additional costs have been incurred processing Winter Fuel Payment claims for winter 2012/13 above the normal staffing allocation.