

COMMUNITY SERVICES — HARDSHIP UTILITY GRANT SCHEME

3215. Mr J.E. McGrath to the Minister for Child Protection; Women’s Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services:

I refer to the article published in The Weekend West on 19 May 2018 titled Labor ‘mean’ over hardship grants fall, and ask:

- (a) Were the HUGS payments to the 406 recipients (as of April 2018) granted prior to 1 January 2018;
- (b) If not, how many of the 406 HUGS payment recipients had their applications granted after 1 January 2018, and what did they have to do in order to comply with the changes announced by the State Government on 18 December 2017;
- (c) Out of the 406 HUGS payment recipients, how many were seeking support because of their inability to pay the following bills:
 - (i) Electricity;
 - (ii) Gas; and
 - (iii) Water;
- (d) Out of the 406 HUGS payment recipients, how many households consist of:
 - (i) Single pensioners; and
 - (ii) Families;
- (e) What was the income range of the 406 HUGS payment recipients;
- (f) What was the average amount of electricity/gas/water bill due to be paid by the 406 recipients, and over how many bills/billing cycles, when the HUGS payment was granted to them;
- (g) Can customers received a HUGS payment through their gas utility provider and the Water Corporation (for water);
- (h) If yes to (g), are they required to go on 180-day payment plans and if not, why; and
- (i) Can the Government provide details on how it is intending to spend \$2.2 billion over four years on concessions?

Ms S.F. McGurk replied:

- (a) There were 406 approved applications in April 2018 for HUGS. Between 1 January and 30 April 2018, there were 7 583 approved applications.
- (b) 406 applications were approved for HUGS payment in April 2018.

Applicants must be assessed as being in financial hardship by their relevant utility provider and must have an outstanding bill between \$300 and \$1 750 (for area south of the 26th parallel). In addition, applicants are required to enter into a payment arrangement for at least 180 days to address the outstanding debt. Customers who have been served a disconnection or restriction notice from the utility provider (subject to having previously entered into a payment arrangement) can apply for HUGS. In addition, customers who are currently disconnected may apply for HUGS subject to entering into a payment arrangement to resolve the remaining debt.
- (c) For the month of April 2018:
 - (i) Electricity: 235
 - (ii) Gas: 80
 - (iii) Water: 91

Applications by Industry for the period January to April 2018:

 - (i) Electricity: 5 548
 - (ii) Gas: 1 309
 - (iii) Water: 724
- (d) Data is collected on ‘Family Status’:

Family Status	Apr 2018	Jan – Apr 2018
Couple	29	788

Couple and Dependent Children	110	2 010
Single	123	2 351
Single and Dependent Children	144	2 434
TOTAL	406	7 583

Data is collected on 'Income Source':

Income Source	Apr 2018	Jan – Apr 2018
Employment	164	2 610
Government Payments	211	4 320
Other	14	386
Self Employed	17	267
TOTAL	406	7 583

- (e) The Department of Communities does not collect data on income range of HUGS recipients. See above for Income Source.
- (f) \$496.60 was the average grant amount for April 2018. The average for the period January to April 2018 was \$403. The Department of Communities does not collect data on the number of billing cycles taken for customers to accrue debt however each application is unique and circumstance varies.
- (g) Customers can apply for a grant towards any utility up to the grant limit for the financial year. The grant can apply to more than one utility in the same financial year, up to the grant limit.
- (h) The customer is required to enter into a payment arrangement as outlined in answer (b), however if customers receive HUGS assistance, they may be required to maintain a payment arrangement for the remaining outstanding debt.
- (i) The Government continues to provide a number of utilities concessions to families in need, with a total of \$2.2 billion forecast to be spent across the forward estimates period, including:
- The \$300 Energy Assistance Payment (\$282 million) which is paid to all households with a means tested concession card;
 - \$81 million for the Dependent Child Rebate, which is paid to households with dependent children and a means tested concession card (\$315 for the first dependent child and \$82 for every additional child);
 - Subsidising country water, sewerage and drainage services (\$1.3 billion);
 - Water concessions for pensioners and seniors, with \$401.6 million to be spent on various discounts to fixed and consumption charges automatically deducted from pensioner and seniors card holder's water bills; and
 - \$46 million allocated to the Hardship Utilities Grants program. Full details are provided in Table 8.5 of Appendix 8 for Budget Paper 3. [See tabled paper no 1555.]