

COMMUNITY SERVICES — HARDSHIP UTILITY GRANT SCHEME

4161. Ms M.J. Davies to the Minister for Child Protection; Women’s Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services:

I refer to the Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (HUGS) and ask for each shire in the Central Wheatbelt electorate:

- (a) how many applications were received for HUGS assistance for each quarter since the March 2017 State election;
- (b) how many of each grant type were issued for each year since the March 2017 State election; and
- (c) how many enquiries did the HUGS unit receive in each quarter since the March 2017 State election:
 - (i) how many were successful in applying for HUGS; and
 - (ii) how many received financial counselling services?

Ms S.F. McGurk replied:

The Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (HUGS) online system does not record or report information at a local government or electorate level. It records and reports information by Regional Development region, such as the Wheatbelt region.

The Department of Communities has manually extracted information from the system for the majority of the Central Wheatbelt electorate which comprises of the Shires of Beverley, Boddington, Brookton, Bruce Rock, Corrigin, Cunderdin, Dowerin, Goomalling, Kellerberrin, Kondinin, Koorda, Merredin, Mount Marshall, Mukinbudin, Narembeen, Northam, Nungarin, Pingelly, Quairading, Tammin, Trayning, Wandering, Westonia, Wongan-Ballidu, Wyalkatchem, Yilgarn, and York.

(a)

Quarter ending	Number of Applications Received
March 2017	187
June 2017	434
September 2017	437
December 2017	346
March 2018	109
June 2018	40
September 2018	55

From January 2018, eligibility criteria for HUGS was amended. Applicants are now required to enter into a payment arrangement for at least 180 days and have a minimum debt amount of \$300, before an application can be considered by the utility provider.

(b)

2016–17	Electricity	Water	Gas	Total approved
Approved applications	631	20	2	653
2017–18	Electricity	Water	Gas	Total approved
Approved applications	850	40	0	890
1 July 18 – 30 September 18	Electricity	Water	Gas	Total approved
Approved applications	40	5	0	45

The number of approved applications differs to the number of applications received for the same period due to the time required to process applications.

(c) The Department of Communities does not receive direct enquiries from the public. Customers contact their utility provider to discuss their payment issues and assistance available to them. Each utility provider administers their own financial hardship policies.

(i) The following table indicates the approved grants based on utility type for the Central Wheatbelt electorate since March 2017.

Quarter ending	Electricity	Water	Gas	Total approved
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March 2017	172	4	0	176
June 2017	250	9	0	259
September 2017	407	15	0	422
December 2017	317	15	0	332
March 2018	96	4	0	100
June 2018	30	6	0	36
September 2018	40	5	0	45

- (ii) Under the relevant utility codes, utility providers are required to advise a customer experiencing financial hardship of independent financial counselling services and relevant consumer representatives to assist the customer. The Department of Communities does not collect this information from utilities.

The Department of Communities has procured the services of the Financial Counselling Network since 7 May 2018, to operate a HUGS Service Centre to assist non-concession card customers. Trained financial support workers, led by a qualified financial counsellor, assess whether the customer is in financial hardship and requires financial assistance. Assessors schedule appointments with a financial counsellor if required and offer other referral services to assist the customer.

To date, no customers from the Central Wheatbelt electorate have utilised the HUGS Service Centre.