



**16 MAR 2016**

Ms Alex Harris

[fyi-request-3626-25c236c8@requests.fyi.org.nz](mailto:fyi-request-3626-25c236c8@requests.fyi.org.nz)

Dear Ms Harris

On 10 February 2016 you emailed the Ministry requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982, information concerning the monitoring of social media to detect benefit fraud as reported by Radio New Zealand on 10 February 2016 in their media article titled 'Beneficiaries are being monitored on social media'.

The Ministry does not have a formal policy to monitor social media. Your request is refused under section 18(e) of the Official Information Act as this information does not exist.

Ministry investigators may from time to time use information in the social media which is publicly accessible to build evidence that supports their enquiries about any potential benefit fraud, or a potential situation that may pose a threat to the safety and security of Ministry staff and its clients.

The Ministry takes its responsibilities in administering \$17 billion worth of income assistance to over one million New Zealanders each year very seriously, and works hard to protect the integrity of the system to ensure it remains fair for all New Zealanders.

The Ministry has a dedicated team of around 90 specialist fraud investigators located throughout the country, and an Intelligence Unit that identifies emerging fraud risks and trends. The Ministry works with other government agencies and Intel Units to identify and reduce the incidence of fraud. The Ministry has eleven data matching programmes to identify potential benefit fraud with seven other government agencies, including Housing New Zealand, Inland Revenue, Customs, the Corrections Department, the Department of Internal Affairs and ACC.

Social media is one type of medium that is used as part of a range of tools available to the Ministry as part of its strategy to protect the benefit system.

The Ministry also investigates cases which arise through allegations from members of the public to the Ministry's national Allegation Line (0800 556 006). Every allegation made to the Allegation Line is followed up and where fraud is suspected the Ministry's Fraud Investigation Unit will make appropriate enquiries, including any use of social media mediums to substantiate any potential inappropriate use of benefit monies.

Part two of your request seeking information about the fraud investigation team's methods for the use of social media, related to a benefit fraud investigation is withheld under section 6(c) of the Official Information Act. Making this information available would likely prejudice the maintenance of the law, including the prevention, investigation and detection of offences.

I can advise that any information collected relating to a person's fraud investigation is retained in line with the Records Management Standard for the New Zealand Public Sector. The following web link provides you with information related to the standard, <http://archives.govt.nz/advice/guidance-and-standards/records-management-standard-new-zealand-public-sector>.

The access of client information is limited to Ministry staff with system privileges to access the relevant benefit systems. The Ministry has a zero tolerance policy for staff who inappropriately access client records. It is vital that the public has trust and confidence in the Ministry to ensure people receive their correct entitlement and do not take advantage of the welfare system.

The Ministry does not record and report instances where an individual's activity on their social media accounts, blogs or online presence is monitored or checked. As such this part of your request as well as the cost of social media monitoring is refused under section 18(e) of the Official information Act as this information does not exist.

You have the right to seek an investigation and review of my response by the Ombudsman, whose address for contact purposes is:

The Ombudsman  
Office of the Ombudsman  
PO Box 10-152  
WELLINGTON 6143

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carolyn Risk', with a horizontal line underneath.

Carolyn Risk  
Deputy Chief Executive, Organisational Integrity