

Freedom of Information Act 2000
FOI Ref: 14157
Date: November 2007

Thank you for your email of 4 October 2007, which you asked to be treated as a Freedom of Information request.

Your questions were about the new Rate Relief Scheme. To put our answers in context, please note that we administer this scheme only in respect of owner-occupiers, while the Northern Ireland Housing Executive administers the scheme for the private and public rented sector, including Housing Associations.

Therefore, the information provided in the following paragraphs refers only to owner-occupiers. If you require information for the private and public rented sector, you may wish to contact the Northern Ireland Housing Executive at the Housing Centre, 2 Adelaide Street, Belfast, BT2 8PB, phone (028) 9024 0588

In the first section of your email, you asked for information on the following.

1. The number of claims for rate relief made under the provisions of the new rate relief scheme as set out in article 14 of The Rates (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

- As the new Rate Relief Scheme closely follows the general principles of the statutory Housing Benefit Scheme, the same application form is used for both. I cannot provide you with a figure for the number of claims specifically made for Rate Relief.
- However, since 1 April 2007, we have received approximately 7,700 claims from owner-occupiers for Housing Benefit/Rate Relief. (We also 'carried over' some 2,233 Housing Benefit claims from 2006/2007.)

2. The number of such claims that have been assessed and cleared by Land and Property Services.

- We have completed approximately 4,720 claims for owner-occupiers since 1 April 2007.

3. The number of claims so made that have yet to be assessed.

- We are currently dealing with around 5,200 claims. All claims are actioned as soon as we receive them, for example, we make sure

that those people who appear to be in most need (such as those who are receiving Pension Credit, Income Support or Job Seeker's Allowance) have their claims 'fast-tracked' so that we can deal with them as quickly as possible.

4. The average amount of such rate relief awarded to each successful applicant.

- The average amount of rate relief awarded to each successful applicant is £123.

In the second section of your email you asked us to -

- Please state the total amount of the £4m that has been paid to date to qualifying pensioners.

- So far, we have awarded over £0.5m to qualifying pensioners.

- Please state how much of this £4m was paid to pensioners already in receipt of rate relief/Housing benefit from the previous rate year 2005/2006.

- We reassessed claims for some 6,000 householders who, prior to the 1 April 2007, were either receiving partial Housing Benefit, or who had recently been disallowed, to see if they are entitled to any extra help through the new Rate Relief scheme. However, we do not have information on how much was paid to pensioners already receiving partial Housing Benefit from 2005/2006.

- If the total £4m is not paid out, will the balance be carried forward to the 2008/2009 rate year?

- The £4m, announced by the then Minister of Finance, David Hanson, was based on what it might cost to provide additional help for pensioners on low incomes (not specifically 'owner occupier pensioners' as referred to in your email). We are working to ensure as far as possible that ratepayers (particularly pensioners and those on low incomes) are aware of this and the other rate relief schemes that are available to help them pay their rate bills. As is generally the case, should all of this amount not be claimed and paid out, it is unlikely that it would be 'carried forward' as such to the 2008/2009 rating year.
- Also, as you may be aware, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, has announced a review of the rating system. This includes looking at the effectiveness of the new rate relief packages to see if there are better ways to deliver relief for those with the greatest difficulty in paying. The findings and outcomes of this Review (which will be announced later this year) may impact on the Rate Relief Scheme in 2008/2009. The report on the public

consultation about the review is available on
www.ratingreviewni.gov.uk