




5 March 2021



Tēnā koe 

Thank you for your email of 21 January 2021 to the Ministry of Education requesting the following information:

*Last year the Ministry decided to supply schools with vegetable growing kits, including small planters and bags of compost.*

*We want to know:*

- How much did the materials purchased for this initiative come to?*
- How big were the bags of compost? i.e 10L? 12L?*
- How many vegetable growing kits actually made it to schools?*
- What happened to the purchased products after the initiative was scrapped?*

Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act).

### **Distance Learning Package**

We have presumed the resource you have asked about relates to the Ki te Ao Mārama Māori-medium learning packs. These packs included potting mix, vegetable seeds and vegetable planter boxes.

The learning packs formed part of the Ministry's \$87.78 million distance learning package, which ensured that learners and whānau had access to at least one distance learning channel while schools, kura and services were closed under COVID-19 Alert Levels 3-4. As part of that package, learning packs were distributed in the first lockdown.

In Auckland's second regional lockdown, most learners were required to learn from home during the COVID-19 Alert Level 3 period from Monday 12 August to Sunday 30 August 2020. Schools, kura and early learning services across the Auckland region supported children and young people to continue their learning from home in a variety of ways. This included the provision of 'pop-up' live and on-demand broadcasts, online curriculum resources, as well as the distribution of learning packs, fit-for-education devices and internet connections.

Ki te Ao Mārama learning packs were one part of that package. The packs were designed for tamariki and rangatahi learning in Māori-medium schools, kura and wharekura, for year levels 1-10. The packs supplemented the learning resources ākonga (learners) received from their place of learning.

These learning packs focused on *Te Ao o Rongo-mā-Tāne* (The Realm of Rongo-mā-Tāne: Atua of Cultivated Food) - to encourage rich learning opportunities to “plant, sow and cultivate kai, and to harvest and learn how to be self-sufficient while engaging within a Te Ao Māori context.” The inclusion of vegetable seeds, vegetable planter boxes and potting mix was a key part of the holistic project-based approach to learning activities. The packs supplemented the learning resources ākonga received from their place of learning. The packs, as designed, were intended to include:

- a bilingual information booklet for whānau and ākonga about how to use the pack
- a range of stationery
- learning activity packs (including a vegetable growing project with seeds, a planter box, 5L potting mix bag and accompanying gardening activity books, and materials for potting mix testing, growing vegetables, and healthy meal preparation)
- reading books and te reo Māori learning resources.

A total of 35,000 Ki te Ao Mārama learning packs were developed in May 2020 to support ākonga reo Māori. The packs were specifically developed for three age groups: years 1-4 (14,100 packs), years 5-8 (16,000 packs), and years 9-10 (4,900 packs).

Of these, 20,900 packs (16,000 for years 5-8 and 4,900 for years 9-10) were intended to include vegetable seed packets, vegetable planter boxes and potting mix.

### Your Request

We have identified the **total costs** for the resources within these packs that relate specifically to your query on ‘vegetable growing kits’.

Resource	Quantity purchased	Cost
15L potting mix	20,900	\$113,069
Vegetable seeds	20,900	\$16,720
Vegetable planter Boxes	20,900	\$606,100

A total of 3,098 Ki te Ao Mārama learning packs were sent out to 50 schools and kura during the August 2020 Covid-19 Alert Level 3 in Auckland. Depending on the age group the packs were intended for, the per-pack cost ranged from approximately \$51 to \$94. The cost for shipping the packs excluding the potting mix was \$6,000.

Due to logistical challenges of COVID-19 Alert Level 3, transportation of the potting mix was likely to cause delays in deployment. To minimise impact on continuity of teaching and learning, a decision was made not to include potting mix in the Auckland Ki te Ao Mārama packs at that time to expedite delivery.

In December 2020 and January 2021, all potting mix purchased for the distance learning package was donated to local kura, kōhanga reo, community gardens and other not-for-profit initiatives in the wider Wellington community. The Ministry made this decision with consideration of the practical difficulties of storing large quantities of potting mix in a warehouse from June 2020, as well as the on-going costs to store the potting mix.

For these reasons, potting mix will be excluded from any future distribution of Ki te Ao Mārama learning packs. The remaining vegetable seeds and vegetable planter boxes will be removed

from the future distribution of Ki te Ao Mārama learning packs and used as curriculum supports for kura and wharekura outside of the distance learning response. However, Ki te Ao Mārama learning packs will continue to provide distance learning resources for ākonga to support their learning from home when required.

I am aware that two staff members without financial delegations mistakenly placed orders under urgency for the vegetable seed packets, vegetable planter boxes and potting mix, acting outside of approved Ministry procurement processes. Additionally, the order was placed for 15L bags of potting mix as 5L bags were not available.

This breach was identified and managed proactively by the Ministry. Even though the intention of the packs aligned with the Ministry's curriculum, the practicalities of sending planter boxes and potting mix to learners was not fully considered.

The Ministry's Internal Audit unit concluded an internal audit of controls and practices within the associated team in February 2021. The review found good procurement approaches were being used across the team with no further anomalies in spending. This included a review of controls and processes relating to procurement.

I would, however, like to note your assertion that the initiative has been scrapped is incorrect. Ensuring we retain a stock of quality teaching and learning resource such as these packs is critical to our role in supporting schools and kura in light of the ongoing changeability of COVID-19 context.

Thank you again for your email. You have the right to ask an Ombudsman to review this decision. You can do this by writing to [info@ombudsman.parliament.nz](mailto:info@ombudsman.parliament.nz) or Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143.

Nāku noa, nā



Ellen MacGregor-Reid  
**Deputy Secretary**  
**Early Learning and Student Achievement**