

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)830/01-02
(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of meeting
held on Monday, 10 December 2001 at 10:45 am
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building

Members Present : Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP (Chairman)
Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Dr Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Hon LI Fung-ying, JP
Hon Henry WU King-cheong, BBS
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee

Members Absent : Hon Bernard CHAN
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon WONG Sing-chi

Public Officers Attending : Items II to V

Mrs Carrie LAM, JP
Director of Social Welfare

Items II and III

Mr Patrick NIP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 2

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Miss YEUNG Kok-wah
Chief Social Security Officer 4
Social Welfare Department

Item V

Miss Diane WONG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Health and Welfare (Welfare) 2

Mr CHEUNG Hing-wah
Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Youth and Corrections)

**Deputations by : Item III
invitation**

Concern Group on CSSA Review for Single Parent Families

Ms CHEW Wai-yi
Member

Ms KWAN Po-ling
Member

Ms TAM Yuk-lin
Member

Ms HO Shin-yee
Staff

Fundamental CSSA Evaluation Group of St. James' Settlement

Ms NG Yu-chun
Resident Representative

Ms LEUNG Mei-yee, Winnie
Resident Representative

Ms CHENG Shuke-ching
Social Worker

Hong Kong Single Parents Association

Ms YU Sau-chu, Jessie

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Chief Executive

Clerk in Attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Assistant Secretary (2) 4

Staff in Attendance : Miss Mary SO
Senior Assistant Secretary (2) 8

I. Confirmation of minutes of meeting held on 12 November 2001
(LC Paper No. CB(2)591/01-02)

The minutes were confirmed.

II. Date of next meeting and items for discussion
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)587/01-02(01) and (02))

2. Members agreed to discuss the following items at the next meeting to be held on 14 January 2002 -

(a) Community Investment and Inclusion Fund; and

(b) Implementation of Information Systems Strategy Phase II - Client Information System/Technical Infrastructure.

Members further agreed to invite deputations to give views on item (a).

3. The Chairman sought members' views as to whether they would like to discuss the issue of impact of the results of the 2001 Population Census on the provision of welfare services. Director of Social Welfare (DSW) said that only summary results had been released so far based on which the Social Welfare Department (SWD) had had some internal preliminary discussion. She considered that in order to assess the impact on the provision of welfare services, more detailed results and analyses would need to be obtained. To this end, the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) had been requested to provide the necessary information and analyses which, to her understanding, would not be available in the next two months. Mr LAW Chi-kwong opined that the issue could still be discussed in February 2002 in the absence of the detailed results and analyses from C&SD, as views expressed at the meeting might be useful to the Administration on deciding how the provision of welfare services should be adjusted to better meet future needs. Members agreed.

4. Miss CHOY So-yuk proposed to discuss the issues of Old Age Allowance and Portable Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme. Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare said that the Administration was still working on the development of a sustainable financial support system for older persons in Hong Kong. The Chairman suggested to include these two issues as a possible item for discussion in March 2002. Members agreed.

III. "Ending Exclusion" Project for Single Parents on CSSA (LC Paper Nos. CB(2)587/01-02(03) to (05))

5. At the invitation of the Chairman, DSW gave a power point presentation on the background for implementing an "Ending Exclusion" Project (the Project) and on a set of measures under the Project, as detailed in the Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)587/01-02(03)). In particular, DSW said that the Project, targeted for implementation by March 2002, was intended for CSSA single parent recipients whose youngest child was aged under 15 and who had been on CSSA for six months or longer. As a start, about 2 000 single parents would be invited to join the Project in the first year of implementation. Priority would be given to the following groups -

- (a) single mothers aged below 50 whose youngest child was aged 10 to 14, as they normally had a lesser burden in child care and the current profile showed that this group had a higher motivation to look for jobs;
- (b) single mothers of younger age (e.g. the unwed mothers) as their chance of getting a job was relatively more promising; and
- (c) single fathers aged below 50 because they might enter the job market more readily if not engaged in child caring.

Single parent recipients who did not fall into the priority groups would also be informed and they might join the Project if they wished.

6. DSW further said that the first entry point to the Project was a supportive and advice-focused interview for the single parents. Aimed at opening up possibilities of an improved life for the single parents and their families, Employment Assistance Co-ordinators (EA Co-ordinators) would introduce to the target participants information on employment assistance, help with child care and other supportive services. DSW pointed out that unlike the Active Employment Assistance (AEA) programme under the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme for other able-bodied CSSA recipients, single parents' participation in the programme was voluntary. To improve work incentive for CSSA single parent recipients whose youngest child was aged under 15, the Administration proposed to raise the level of monthly disregarded earnings (DE)

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under the CSSA Scheme for those single parents who had been on CSSA for six months or longer from up to a maximum of \$1,805 to up to a maximum of \$2,500 until their youngest child reached 15. Subject to views collected, the Administration would approach the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in January 2002 for approval of the aforesaid proposal.

7. As inadequate child care support was often seen by single parents as a major obstacle to work, DSW said that After School Care Programme (ASCP) coupons, at a value of \$930 per place per month reimbursable to the service provider, would be provided free of charge to eligible single parents on CSSA. Under this arrangement, single parents could use the coupons to obtain a free place in one of the non-governmental organisation (NGO)-run centres with ASCP. To start with, about 300 ASCP coupons would be provided to single parents attending employment retraining programmes, being engaged in activities under the Special Job Attachment Programme (SJAP) and the Intensive Employment Assistance Fund (IEAF) projects or actively seeking jobs/undertaking paid jobs. Continued provision of ASCP service would be subject to review to ensure that the support was given to those most in need.

8. For Project participants who were not ready for employment, DSW said that EA Co-ordinators would refer them to one of the five Single Parent Centres (SPCs), set up since February 2001, for counselling and other supportive services as appropriate. Single parents who had gained readiness towards employment after receiving services at SPCs would be arranged to receive employment assistance through the EA Co-ordinators or employment services at SPCs, depending on individual situations.

9. DSW added that the cost of implementing the Project, estimated at about \$8.5 million per year, would be met through redeployment of existing resources within SWD. A tertiary institution would be commissioned to conduct a longitudinal study to gauge the psychological, attitudinal and behavioural changes of the single parents and their children over time. It was expected that the evaluation might spread over a period of two years to fully assess the impact of the Project on the single parents and their children.

10. The Chairman then invited deputations to give their views on the subject.

Concern Group on CSSA Review for Single Parent Families (the Concern Group)

11. Representatives of the Concern Group took members through their submission (LC Paper No. CB(2)587/01-02(04)). Views of the Concern Group were summarised as follows -

ASCP coupons

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- (a) ASCP coupons should be provided to eligible CSSA single parent recipients for a duration of six months, instead of on a monthly basis, so that their children would not have to leave the after-school child care centres the following month once they became unemployed again;
- (b) NGO-run centres providing after-school care service should also take in children aged 12 to 14;

SFS Scheme

- (c) Requirement that AEA participants must at least apply for two jobs within two weeks should be relaxed for single mothers aged over 50, having regard to the fact that job openings for women of this age group were few;
- (d) Special grant for transport fares to attend job interviews should be provided to CSSA single parents;
- (e) DE provisions were too complicated and should be made simpler to facilitate easy understanding by the recipients and the SWD staff alike;
- (f) Participants of IEAF projects should be given an allowance similar to that received by the participants of SJAP projects;
- (g) Requirement that children of CSSA recipients must enroll in the AEA programme once they reached 15, left school and in normal health, should not be enforced indiscriminately, having regard to the fact that these young people, having taken up paid employment, might be pressurised to move away from their families in order not to affect the amount of CSSA payments their families were receiving. To address such, the level of DE for this group of young people should be raised;

Special grants for single parents on CSSA

- (h) Special grants should be provided to single parents on CSSA to help them meet their children's school-related expenses and other essential needs, such as buying spectacles; and
- (i) Long-term supplement for single parents on CSSA should be reinstated, so that they would have the means to replace or repair their home appliances and undertake necessary renovation work in their homes.

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12. Representatives of the Evaluation Group took members through their submission (LC Paper No. CB(2)587/01-02(05)). Views of the Evaluation Group were summarised as follows -

- (a) The number of places for the SJAP projects should be increased, so as to help more single parents to move towards self-reliance. At the same time, the Administration should expedite the commissioning of infrastructure projects announced in the Policy Address to meet the pressing needs for jobs. Apart from this, a statutory minimum wage system should be established to safeguard people's right to an adequate standard of living;
- (b) To address the labelling effect of ASCP coupons that recipients were lazy people taking advantage of the social security system and to provide single parents with more flexibility in choosing ASCP places for their children, eligible CSSA single parents should be given cash to obtain ASCP places for their children. The amount of cash to be given would be based on the fees charged by the centres providing after-school care service. Moreover, such cash grant should be for a duration of six months and that it should also be allowed to be used to pay for tutorial fees for children up to the age of 15;
- (c) 70% of the monthly earnings of CSSA recipients should be disregarded, so as to provide more incentives for CSSA recipients to seek jobs and move towards self-reliance;
- (d) Special grants should be provided for children of CSSA recipients, so that they would have the same learning and development opportunities as children whose parents were not on CSSA;
- (e) Various special grants for items such as telephone charge and rent deposit, and long-term supplement should be reinstated; and
- (f) Free daytime school places should be created for women who did not have the opportunity to receive nine-year basic education when they were young. Special grants should also be provided to this group of women to meet their school-related expenses.

Hong Kong Single Parents Association (HKSPA)

13. Ms Jessie YU of HKSPA expressed doubt about the effectiveness of the Project in helping single parents on CSSA to move towards self-reliance, and queried whether it was aimed at saving money. Ms YU further said that unless a different social security scheme was devised for able-bodied CSSA recipients, it would be very

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difficult for them to become independent of public assistance. This was because the existing CSSA Scheme, drawn up in the 1970s, were targetted at helping people who were aged, disabled and/or in ill-health, and therefore could not be expected to become self-reliant. In her view, one way to help able-bodied recipients to become self-reliant was to allow them to keep all of their monthly earnings, whilst CSSA support should continue to be given to them to cover their basic expenses, such as rent, children's education and medical care, until that time they were in a position to leave the safety net.

Discussion

14. Mr LAW Chi-kwong said that in order to help single mothers on CSSA to move towards self-reliance, creating more formal education opportunities for them was more effective than providing them with piecemeal skills training. In this connection, Mr LAW enquired about the action(s) which had been or would be taken by the Administration in this regard. Mr LAW shared the deputations' views that the existing level of DE could not provide incentive for CSSA recipients to find work and continue working, and urged the Administration to address such.

15. DSW responded that arising from earlier discussions at the Social Welfare Advisory Committee, the Administration had undertaken to discuss with institutions offering adult education on the possibility of running daytime basic education courses for single parents on CSSA. Regarding the comments that the provision of DE could not provide incentive for CSSA recipients to find work and reservation on the effectiveness of the various employment assistance programme, DSW said that this was not the case as evidenced by the fact that as at 30 October 2001, 13% of participants in the AEA programme, 19% of the participants in the SJAP projects and 35% participants in the IEAF projects had found a job. On the suggestion of raising the level of DE, DSW said that the Administration would consider the desirability of doing so in its review of DE provisions next year. DSW, however, pointed out that concern had been raised that increasing the level of DE might encourage recipients to benefit from the high level of DE while continue staying on CSSA, instead of moving off CSSA.

16. Responding to the suggestions of providing more special grants to CSSA recipients, DSW said that there was no strong justifications for such grants as evidenced by the following figures which revealed that the existing CSSA payments were adequate to meet the basic and essential needs of CSSA families. For example, the average monthly CSSA payment of \$10,199 for a household of four members or \$10,530 for a four-member single parent family was comparable or above the average household expenditure of the lowest 20th, and even the lowest 25th percentile of the population which stood at \$9,680 and \$10,320 respectively. Another indication that CSSA payments were adequate was that CSSA recipients had more money to spend on non-essential items than before. According to the recent studies on the spending

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pattern of CSSA recipients, money spent on food had dropped from 69.1% in 1994-95 to 56.1% in 1999-2000, whereas money spent on miscellaneous goods and services had increased from 7% to 9.1% and from 3.5% to 11.6% respectively over the same period. Although the percentage of money spent on food had dropped, it did not mean that CSSA recipients had to skim on their food bills. On the contrary, there had been a real increase of 17% on food spending over the period because of real improvements made to the CSSA Scheme. In addition, the purchasing power of the CSSA payments had increased by 11%, as a result of continuous deflation since 1998 whilst no corresponding downward adjustments had been made to the CSSA standard rate. Based on the foregoing figures, DSW said that it would be unfair to low-income families not on CSSA if CSSA recipients were given more benefits.

17. DSW further said that the Administration could not accept the allegation that the ASCP coupons had a labelling effect and the comments that the arrangement of providing single parents with ASCP coupons lacked flexibility. DSW pointed out that single parents could use these coupons to obtain ASCP places for their children from over 130 centres providing after-school care service located throughout the territory. As regards the comments that the implementation of the Project was to save money, DSW said that there was no question of such a situation as participants were not obliged to take part in any employment assistance programmes and no sanctions would be taken against them if they chose not to enroll in the AEA programme.

18. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan enquired why only 300 of the 2 000 single parents on CSSA invited to join the Project would be provided with free ASCP places. As some 1 700 Project participants would be without provision of ASCP service, Mr LEE also enquired whether the 10% of the 6 000 subsidised ASCP places earmarked to be provided on a half-fee or no-fee basis places would be provided to these single parents on CSSA. Mr LEE further enquired whether consideration would be given to extending the provision of free or subsidised ASCP service to CSSA families with both parents.

19. DSW explained that the reason why only 300 Project participants would be provided with free ASCP places at any one time was because SWD could only identify savings from existing resources to fund 300 ASCP places at no cost to service users. DSW, however, pointed out that not all Project participants would be eligible for ASCP provision as some of them would choose to remain a full-time parent until their youngest child reached 15 years of age. Moreover, once a single parent, say, became unemployed again, withdrew from attending employment retraining programmes, completed the activities under the SJAP/IEAF projects or failed to actively seek jobs, he/she would cease to be provided with a ASCP coupon and the freed up coupon could then be provided to another eligible single parent. DSW further said that if more single parents participating in the Project had found paid employment thus proving the cost-effectiveness of the ASCP coupon, there would be a strong case for deploying

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money saved from reduced CSSA payments made to fund more free ASCP places for eligible CSSA single parents.

20. As regards Mr LEE's second question, DSW replied that the provision of ASCP coupon would not affect the current provision of 6 000 subsidised ASCP places. She said that while it was up to the NGO-run centres with ASCP to decide to whom the 600 places earmarked to be provided on a half-fee or no-fee basis should be given, as a general rule, priority was given to CSSA families and low-income families not on CSSA. At present, 519 and 399 parents were provided with ASCP places on a half-fee or no-fee basis respectively. Of the 399 parents provided with ASCP places on an no-fee basis, 175 were on CSSA and 224 were low-income earners not on CSSA. To answer Mr LEE's query, no less than 900 ASCP places at full fee waiver or half-fee basis would be available for CSSA families and low-income families not on CSSA.

21. In response to Mr LEE's last question, DSW said that it was not appropriate to provide subsidised ASCP service to all CSSA families, as the provision of such was meant to meet a social need as opposed to an educational need. Moreover, as resources were finite, it was incumbent upon the Administration to use them on areas most in need. Notwithstanding, DSW pointed out that CSSA families who needed ASCP service in order to work could always approach any one of the NGO-run centres with ASCP to seek a full fee waiver or half-fee place.

22. On the suggestion of extending the validity period of ASCP coupon to six months, DSW said that the Administration would seriously consider it if the employment situation of the single parents concerned had stabilised. DSW explained that the reason for setting the validity period of ASCP coupons at one month initially was because most Project participants willing to move into work would be either actively seeking jobs or attending training programmes at the beginning.

23. Ms LI Fung-ying expressed concern that the existing child care centres and after-school care centres fell short of meeting the needs of single parents. For example, most child care centres would be closed during inclement weather and some refused to take in a child running a fever or suffering from ailments. As a result, the single parents concerned had to seek leave from their employers to look after their children, which was not always possible.

24. DSW conceded that the operations of the child care centres and after-school care centres could not fully meet the needs of service users. However, she pointed out that it was not realistic to expect these centres to stay open to suit the needs of all service users. For example, it was not viable for a child care centre or a after-school care centre to stay open late in the evening to accommodate one child whose parent had long working hours. To better meet the child care needs of single parents, a plan was underway to promote the development of mutual help service in the

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neighbourhood. She was also keen to explore engaging more families in providing child minding service for children living in their neighbourhood.

25. Ms Cyd HO said that the existing CSSA payments failed to address the needs of those CSSA recipients wishing to pursue studies to equip themselves to better meet the requirements of a knowledge-based economy. In this connection, Ms HO was of the view that special grants for transport fares to school and school fee should be provided to these recipients.

26. As most CSSA single parents would likely get only low-paid jobs, the Chairman considered that many Project participants would not be motivated to enroll in the AEA Programme. The Chairman then sought the Administration's view on the suggestion of devising a separate safety net for able-bodied CSSA recipients.

27. DSW responded that the raising of the level of DE for Project participants to \$2,500 should provide incentives for some of them to take up paid employment and move towards self-reliance. DSW pointed out that a four-member single parent family would have a total monthly income of \$13,030 if the CSSA recipient earned \$4,500 per month, as opposed to only \$10,530 if he/she was still unemployed. On the suggestion of devising a separate safety net for able-bodied CSSA recipients, DSW said that since the introduction of the SFS Scheme in 1999, the administration of CSSA already made a distinction between able-bodied and non-able-bodied.

28. In concluding the discussion, the Chairman urged the Administration to seriously consider the possibility of extending the validity period of the ASCP coupons to six months.

IV. New Initiatives to strengthen support for families

(LC Paper No. CB(2)587/01-02(06))

29. Due to time constraint and having regard to the fact that this item had no urgency, members agreed to defer the discussion of it to a later meeting.

(Post-meeting note : This item was subsequently scheduled for discussion in January 2002.)

V. Initiatives to strengthen youth welfare services

(LC Paper No. CB(2)587/01-02(07))

30. DSW briefed members on the Administration's paper which reported on the new initiatives to strengthen welfare services for young people.

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31. Referring to the Administration's proposal to set up an all-night drop-in centre for youth-at-risk in Kwun Tong next year, Ms Cyd HO expressed concern whether such a centre could meet the needs of young night drifters (YNDs) scattered throughout the territory. Ms HO then enquired about the entry qualification of peer counsellors who would be recruited from January 2002 to enhance support services for youth.

32. DSW responded that as the 18 outreach social work teams tasked to provide services for YNDs were each provided with a van, there should be no problem for them to bring young people from outside the Kwun Tong District to the proposed drop-in centre. DSW further said that where resources permitting and suitable premises could be identified, the Administration would consider setting up a similar centre in the North District which had the highest number of YNDs. Responding to the Chairman's suggestion of organising daytime activities for young people coming to the drop-in centre, DSW said that this would not be done as it would duplicate the work of the children and youth centres (CYCs). As regards the entry qualification of peer counsellors, DSW said that they were expected to be of at least Secondary 5 standard and have had successful experience in ironing out growing pains in order to serve other youngsters who were now muddling at the crossroad.

33. Ms Cyd HO further enquired whether pre and after-employment training would be provided to peer counsellors, so as to ensure the quality of their service. DSW responded that pre and after-employment training for peer counsellors would be provided by the CYCs which hired them. In addition, SWD also planned to hold some centralised training sessions for these peer counsellors. DSW further said that the CYCs concerned would be reminded that they should not treat their peer counsellors as programme assistants, as the former was tasked to provide one-to-one counselling to Secondary 3 school leavers whereas the latter was tasked to assist in organising activities.

34. Ms LI Fung-ying enquired whether the two additional psychotropic substance abuse counseling centres to be set up in the East Kowloon and Hong Kong Regions for young psychotropic substance abusers would be run by NGOs. Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Youth and Corrections) (ADSW) replied in the positive. ADSW further said that SWD would shortly invite applications from NGOs to operate the aforesaid two centres for young psychotropic substance abusers preferably in Kwun Tong District in the East Kowloon Region and in Wanchai or Eastern District in the Hong Kong Region. DSW added that apart from this Panel, SWD was currently also consulting the NGOs providing youth services, the existing three psychotropic substance abuse counseling centres and the Hospital Authority (HA) on the scope of services to be provided by the two new centres before finalising the service specifications for invitation of proposals. Action would also be taken to review the existing provision of public and school-based education on substance abuse.

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35. Mr LAW Chi-kwong said that setting the entry qualification of peer counsellors of at least Secondary 5 standard would screen out many eligible young people possessing, say, Secondary 3 standard. Mr LAW further said that peer counselling should not be targetted at Secondary 3 school leavers only, as many Secondary 1 to 3 students also needed support and guidance in overcoming their growing pains. Mr LAW was also of the view that it would be more effective if peer counselling was provided through the outreach teams, rather than be provided as part of the services of CYCs and integrated teams (ITs), as the youngsters targetted by the outreach teams were more at risk. Mr LAW hoped that SWD would work closely with HA in helping young drug abusers.

36. ADSW responded that the reasons for requiring peer counsellors to possess a Secondary 5 qualification were threefold. Firstly, it was to ensure that they had the necessary knowledge and skills to perform duties required of them. Secondly, it was hoped that their successful experience of ironing out growing pains would encourage Secondary 3 school leavers to re-enter schools and complete their secondary school education. Thirdly, it was hoped that their experience of being a peer counsellor would inspire them to attain, for example, a higher qualification in social work. ADSW further said that the reason why the provision of peer counseling was made part of the services of CYCs and ITs was because all secondary schools had already formed a strategic partnership with CYCs and ITs in their own school districts. Moreover, peer counsellors were not experienced enough to work independently and would need back up from seasoned social workers working at CYCs and on ITs. DSW explained that targetting the provision of peer counselling at Secondary 3 school leavers and not Secondary 1 to 3 students took into account various welfare programmes already available to Secondary 1 to 3 students in schools. DSW clarified that no young people with a criminal record would be recruited as peer counsellors, regardless of their success in overcoming their personal problems. DSW, however, agreed to give further thoughts to the suggestion of lowering the entry qualification of peer counsellors on a case by case basis where appropriate. On the suggestion of collaborating more closely with HA to help young drug abusers, DSW assured members that this would be done.

37. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan opined that peer counselling should also be provided to participants of the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme run by the Labour Department. DSW responded that SWD had no intention to do so at this stage, as it considered the arrangement of providing peer counselling as part of the services of CYCs and ITs should be effective in reaching out to the target service recipients. However, separately, participants of the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme were accorded priority in being recruited as programme assistants.

38. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 1:00 pm.

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Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
7 January 2002