

(Translation)

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30 September 2005

Mr Wong Wai-sing
Chairman
Welfare Worker Branch
Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association
8 Wylie Road,
King's Park,
Kowloon.

Dear Mr Wong,

Welfare Worker Grade of the Social Welfare Department

Thank you for your letters of 14 June 2005 and 5 July 2005 to the Financial Secretary and Secretary for Civil Service respectively, who have asked me to reply on their behalf.

We have consulted the Director of Social Welfare on your views on the employment of non-civil service contract (NCSC) staff and the management and deployment of the Welfare Worker (WW) and other related grades in Social Welfare Department (SWD). SWD's responses on the following suggestions/comments are provided in the Annex –

- (I) Proposal of merging NCSC Employment Assistance Co-ordinators with NCSC Social Security Assistants;
- (II) Employment of NCSC staff in the Social Security Branch of SWD;
- (III) Deletion of posts upon upgrading of the computer systems of the Social Security Branch;
- (IV) Career development of the WW grade and arrangements for surplus staff in SWD; and
- (V) Merger proposal of the WW grade with the Social Security Assistant (SSA) grade.

On 3 February you had put forward to the Financial Secretary a number of suggestions on monitoring the employment of NCSC staff. We had given our views to the suggestions on 21 April. In your letter of 5 July, you requested us to re-consider the suggestions. Our responses are as follows –

(I) To establish a monitoring committee with independent members

The NCSC Scheme, introduced in 1999, aims to provide Heads of Department (HoDs) with a flexible means to employ staff on fixed term contracts to meet service needs that are short term, part-time or under review. Subject to meeting the conditions as set out in the NCSC Scheme, HoDs have the full authority and discretion to decide on the employment of NCSC staff and related matters. There are detailed guidelines on the scope, terms of employment, remuneration package, recruitment procedures, etc. for HoDs to follow in the employment of NCSC staff. We have also established various control and monitoring mechanisms at departmental and bureau levels. At departmental level, the employment of NCSC staff must be approved by a directorate officer with delegated authority from HoDs and there should be a directorate officer not below the Directorate pay scale of D2 equivalent to control and monitor the implementation of the NCSC scheme. At bureaux level, many bureaux/departments have set up panels or in-house staff redeployment committees to examine the employment of NCSC staff and to implement internal staff redeployment. In view of these, we do not consider it necessary to establish a monitoring committee to examine the employment of NCSC staff by departments.

(II) To implement internal staff redeployment before employing NCSC staff

We are concerned about and committed to ensuring the optimal use of human resources in the civil service. In order to optimize the deployment of clerical and secretarial grades staff, we have strengthened the control on the employment of NCSC staff for clerical and secretarial duties since June 2004. HoDs are required to seek assistance from the Director of General Grades for deployment of suitable civil servants from other departments to undertake clerical and secretarial duties. They would only be allowed to employ new NCSC staff for clerical and secretarial duties for a contract period of not exceeding one year when the need cannot be met by such deployment. We have also requested Bureau Secretaries/Heads of Grades to co-ordinate re-deployment of common grade officers in departments under their respective policy schedule. Your suggestion is in fact our prevailing policy and practice.

(III) To tighten up the arrangement on the employment of NCSC staff

You suggested that we should tighten up the arrangement on the employment of NCSC staff. Upon completion of the project/task, the NCSC contract should be terminated immediately. If there is a need to offer further employment to the NCSC staff, departments should apply to the monitoring committee.

NCSC staff are employed on fixed term contracts of up to three years to meet service needs that are short term, part-time or under review. The contract period is determined according to the service and operational needs and the employment relationship with the NCSC staff ends upon expiry of the contract. If there are service and operational needs, HoDs may offer further employment to the serving NCSC staff. As regards your suggestion on the establishment of a monitoring committee, we have already responded in subparagraph (I) above.

(IV) To require departments to report the latest information on the employment of NCSC staff regularly

You suggested that we should require departments to report the latest information on the employment of NCSC staff regularly to monitor the situation of NCSC employment.

For overall monitoring of the NCSC scheme, we conduct half-yearly surveys as at 30 June and 31 December each year to collect statistics from departments on the general information of NCSC staff and additional ad hoc surveys where needed. We also report the information to the Legislative Council Panel on Public Service regularly. Given the nature of the NCSC scheme, and in order to maintain its flexibility, it is our policy not to micro-manage departments in the employment of NCSC staff.

Regarding your proposal to merge the WW grade with the SSA grade, SWD has given a detailed account on the considerations and the reasons for not implementing the proposal in the Annex. As it was SWD's considered decision having regard to the department's operational requirements, we do not consider it appropriate to intervene.

Yours sincerely,

(Mrs Sharon YIP)
for Secretary for the Civil Service

c.c.	Financial Secretary	(Attn: AA/FS)
	Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food	(Attn : Mr Freely CHENG)
	Director of Social Welfare	(Attn: Mr Paul TUNG)

SWD's response to the Welfare Worker Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants Association's letters of 14 June and 5 July 2005 to the Financial Secretary and the Secretary for the Civil Service respectively

(I) Proposal of merging Non-Civil Service Contract (NCSC) Employment Assistance Co-ordinators with NCSC Social Security Assistants

SWD had explained the following proposals in paragraphs 8 and 9 of its reply attached to the letter of the Secretary for the Civil Service (SCS) to the Welfare Worker (WW) Branch dated 21 April –

- (a) Redefining the duties between Senior Social Security Assistants (SSSAs) and Social Security Assistants (SSAs); and
- (b) Integrating **NCSC** Employment Assistant Co-ordinators (EACos) with **NCSC** SSAs.

When the proposals were introduced, SWD had made it very clear to all staff concerned that they were only initial proposals.

2. SWD always strives for improvement. The objectives of the proposals were to enhance communication and co-ordination amongst the staff responsible for the administration of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme and the Active Employment Assistance (AEA) programme, and to prevent “double handling” of cases (i.e. at present, cases requiring employment assistance are being handled by both SSSAs and EACos). The proposals also aimed at re-defining the duties between SSSAs and SSAs to facilitate more even distribution of workload, to streamline the work of the frontline staff and achieve better utilization of manpower resources. This would enable SWD to provide better service to those in need and strengthen its gate-keeping role in prevention of fraud and abuse of the CSSA Scheme. In view of the significant impact of the proposals on the operation of the Social Security Branch, the department carried out extensive consultation with the staff side through various channels during February and April to collect their views.

3. Before the WW Branch wrote to the Financial Secretary (FS) on **14 June**, SWD had issued a letter on **20 May** to all staff concerned in the Social Security Branch informing them that having carefully considered the findings of the questionnaire surveys, the department had decided not to implement the proposals since staff's views were very diverse.

4. The job nature and work focuses of SSSAs and EACos are quite different. SSSAs are responsible for the management of CSSA cases, including investigation, eligibility assessment, CSSA payments, recovery of overpayment, etc., whereas EACos are responsible for the administration of the AEA Programme and assisting unemployed CSSA recipients in job seeking to achieve self-reliance. A detailed description of the roles of EACos is at paragraph 7 below.

5. As SWD has decided not to implement the proposals, under the existing work arrangements SSSAs and EACos may need to interview the same applicant separately for different purposes. However, such "double handling" is basically acceptable.

6. SWD will review the work procedures on a regular basis to strengthen and improve the implementation of the CSSA Scheme. Since SSSAs and EACos work under the same Senior Social Security Officer in districts, SWD will continue to strengthen communication amongst the staff to minimize "double handling" of cases. SWD will also give priority in resource allocation to set up a central debt recovery unit to enhance the operation efficiency of the CSSA Scheme.

(II) Employment of NCSC Staff in the Social Security Branch of SWD

The role of EACos

7. On 1 June 1999, SWD implemented the Support for Self-reliance Scheme (SFS) to encourage and help unemployed CSSA recipients and other socially disadvantaged groups to rejoin the workforce and move towards self-reliance through active assistance, namely, the AEA Programme. To implement this programme, SWD has employed EACos in Social Security Field Units (SSFUs). Acting as an intermediary, the EACos provide the necessary information to enable the able-bodied unemployed CSSA recipients participating in the AEA Programme to gain access to up-to-date labour market

information and other support services, to develop personalised action plans to assist them to find jobs, to monitor progress and to render support where needed.

8. EACos play a very important role in the implementation of the SFS. The WW Branch's view that the roles and functions of the EACos have diminished, as stated in its letter to FS on 14 June, is a misunderstanding.

The need for employment of NCSC staff and creation of temporary jobs in the Social Security Branch

9. The questions were addressed in paragraphs 4 to 7 and 10 of SWD's response attached to SCS's reply to the WW Branch dated 21 April. Because of the unfavourable economic conditions in recent years, the CSSA caseload has steadily increased. Hence, SWD has employed a number of NCSC SSAs to conduct investigations for processing or reviewing applications for assistance under various social security schemes, and to assist applicants in obtaining services not provided through social security schemes. Moreover, to implement the SFS, SWD has employed NCSC EACos to help able-bodied unemployed CSSA recipients participating in the Scheme to gain access to up-to-date labour market information and other support services, to develop personalised action plans for job seeking and to monitor progress. To tackle unemployment, the Government has also created a large number of temporary jobs in the public sector to help the unemployed enter/re-enter the labour market and to meet departments' operational needs. Under the job creation initiatives, SWD has employed 108 Programme Assistants. On 4 March 2005, the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved the necessary funding to extend these temporary jobs for another year.

10. With the economy gradually recovering, the upsurge in social security workload appears to be stabilizing. It would be imprudent for SWD to increase its social security manpower on a permanent basis at this stage and the employment of NCSC staff is a pragmatic solution for the time being.

(III) Deletion of posts upon upgrading the computer systems of the Social Security Branch

11. Upon upgrading of the computer systems of the Social Security Branch, SWD has deleted the relevant posts as pledged. At present, a few

posts have been created through internal redeployment to cope with the increasing demand for CSSA services. The department will annually review the continued needs of these posts.

(IV) Career development of the WW Grade and arrangements for surplus staff in SWD

Career development of the WW Grade

12. SWD understands that members of the WW grade are concerned about their career prospects and their expectation of opportunities for career development in the department. SWD would strive its best to promote the career prospects of the WW grade when circumstances permit. For instance, in 2000-01, SWD recruited all 41 WWs who passed the job interviews as Social Work Assistant (SWA) through in-service appointment (though one of them subsequently reverted back to the WW grade). After the in-service appointment exercise, since there were still SWA vacancies that needed to be filled immediately, and at the same time the freeze on civil service recruitment was lifted, the department decided to fill the vacancies through open recruitment. Indeed, in both the in-service appointment of WWs as SWAs and the open recruitment of SWAs, the department had made a number of special arrangements to meet the requests of the WW grade -

- (a) Special arrangements were adopted in the in-service appointment of WWs as SWAs in August 2000. In addition to those WWs who had obtained the professional qualification of social worker before the deadline of application (i.e. 14 September 2000), all WWs pursuing a diploma in social work in their final year of study in 1999/2000 were considered having met the qualification requirements for appointment as SWAs provided that they could submit to the department the documentary proof of having obtained the requisite professional qualification before the end of December 2000;
- (b) Advertisements were published in June 2001 for open recruitment of SWAs. According to the established practice, the waiting list for the previous round of recruitment should be cancelled after the commencement of the new round. As a special arrangement for the WW grade, the department appointed all the seven WWs on the

waiting list for in-service appointment in August 2001 after the commencement of open recruitment; and

- (c) As regards open recruitment, SWD also exercised discretion to allow all eligible serving WWs to be interviewed without undergoing the shortlisting process which was required of other applicants. Seven additional WWs were granted interviews as a result of this special arrangement.

13. Regarding the internal recruitment of Social Security Officers II (SSOIs), SWD has explained to the WW Branch the current policies on internal recruitment through meetings and correspondence in the last couple of years. At the meetings with the WW Branch on 6 August 2003 and 4 March 2004, as well as in the letter dated 21 November 2001, the department had explained in detail that for members of a certain grade to transfer to another by means of internal recruitment, the job nature of the two grades concerned must be similar. Since the routine duties of both SSAs and SSOIs are related to the social security scheme, it is therefore feasible for SWD to make the above internal recruitment arrangement. However, as the job nature of WWs and SSOs is completely different, the department has not made any internal recruitment arrangement for the WW grade. The department had made it clear at the meeting with the WW Branch on 6 August 2003 that, should it be necessary to recruit SSOIs internally in future, priority would still be given to eligible SSAs as their job nature is similar to that of the SSO grade and is also related to the social security work. When the freeze on civil service recruitment is lifted in future, SWD may conduct an open recruitment of SSOIs again if necessary, and eligible WWs are welcome to apply.

14. **If** the freeze on civil service recruitment is lifted and **should** recruitment of SSAs be considered, SWD will consider applications of staff who meet the entry requirements instead of only accepting applications from any one grade.

Arrangements for surplus staff

15. The WW Branch has complained that SWD has shown favoritism towards other grades with surplus staff. It is actually an established policy of the department to deploy surplus staff, **irrespective of grades**, to service areas in need of additional hands. This can meet service demand as well as

optimising the use of manpower resources, thus enabling surplus staff to continue to contribute to the department.

16. SWD is actively exploring new work types for WWs made surplus as a result of service re-engineering. In fact, due to the fast growing demand for social welfare services in recent years, new initiatives are being introduced to strengthen elderly services, rehabilitation services and services to tackle domestic violence and support deprived children and youths. With an urgent need to inject additional manpower for these new services, SWD has, according to the service needs, deployed surplus WWs to work in service areas where the job nature is akin to that of the WW grade, i.e. social welfare services. All of these services are new services not supported by additional resources. Of the existing 102 surplus WWs, 15 have been deployed to the Standardized Care Need Assessment Management Offices (Elderly Services), 60 to the Planning and Coordinating Teams in the district offices, and 4 to other services units. While it is more suitable for WWs to perform duties in welfare service areas than in the social security field, SWD has deployed 23 WWs to assist in the SFS as Job Developers in the social security field, as the work nature of Job Developers is broadly consistent with the WW's welfare-oriented background. SWD will review the deployment of surplus WWs on a regular basis to ensure that they are gainfully deployed to service areas in need of additional hands.

Reasons for not deploying surplus WWs to Integrated Family Service Centres

17. WW Branch questioned why SWD did not deploy surplus WWs to Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs). In fact, SWD has already transformed all Family Services Centres (FSCs) to IFSCs by phases in 2004-05. An IFSC, composed of a Family Resource Unit, a Family Support Unit and a Family Counselling Unit, serves a well-defined geographical boundary through provision of a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services including family life education, parent-child activities, enquiry service, outreaching service, mutual support groups, counselling and referral service for individuals or families in need.

18. The IFSCs of SWD have been set up by pooling together resources of FSCs, Family Support and Resource Centres (FSRCs), Family Support Networking Teams (FSNTs) and Family Life Education Units (FLEUs). In other words, FSRCs, FSNTs and FLEUs no longer exist in the department

after the re-engineering. Part of the work of the existing FSRCs/FSNTs that is performed by WWs and not a core service of IFSCs (e.g. providing support for volunteers and uniform groups) has been put under Planning and Coordinating Teams. Such duties will continue to be performed by WWs. Other than that, the work of FSRCs/FSNTs has been integrated into the new IFSC service model.

(V) Merger Proposal of the WW Grade with the SSA Grade

19. SWD has explained the matter in paragraphs 11 and 12 of its response attached to the reply from the SCS to the WW Branch dated 21 April. SWD has carried out a comprehensive review in August 2004 regarding the WW Branch's request of merging the WW grade with the SSA grade and informed all the staff associations concerned of the suggestion.

20. The WW Branch opined that SWD's views in the appendix of the reply were prejudiced and unsubstantiated. As a matter of fact, SWD did inform the related staff associations of the Social Security Branch of the WW Branch's merger proposal at the meetings with them on 22 December 2004, 18 January 2005 and 27 January 2005. SWD understands the concerns of these staff associations over the merger proposal, as the proposal would inevitably affect the career prospects of the SSA grade.

21. The WW Branch also claimed that SWD has failed to look into aspects like service quality, long-term training of staff as well as better use of human resources. In fact, SWD had taken into account various factors before replying to the WW Branch's merger proposal. These factors included the overall manpower situation of the SSA grade, the long-term direction for the provision of social security services, the development of the affected grades, the relevant experience and expertise of staff involved, the overall resources availability of the department, and the demand for social welfare services. SWD is of the view that the merger proposal is not an appropriate solution to resolve the surplus staff problems, for the following reasons:

(a) Suitability of the WW grade to take up social security work

- (i) The suitability of staff in one grade to take up the work of another grade depends on the similarity of job nature between the two. The expertise, job responsibilities and

experience of WWs lie mainly in the area of social welfare services, and they are traditionally posted to provide frontline support service to the vulnerable groups and people with special or particular needs such as providing care to children in reception, rehabilitation centres and day nurseries; looking after elderly persons in residential homes and sheltered housing for the elderly; training and supervising disabled persons in rehabilitation centres; and organizing interest/uniform groups in youth centres, etc. The SSA grade, on the other hand, is responsible for the social security work and the management of CSSA cases including the gate-keeping functions of investigation, assessment of eligibility of CSSA applicants, etc. The job nature of two grades is entirely different.

- (ii) At present, there is still a need for the service of the WW grade. SWD considers that retaining the WW grade can enable WWs to be continuously employed in jobs that are relevant to their professional knowledge and experience, thus better utilizing their expertise and skills to provide the best service to the public.
- (iii) Surplus WWs arising from service re-engineering have been fully deployed to support new social welfare services where there are no additional resources. Details of the deployment are set out in paragraph 16 above.

(b) Response from the Social Security Related Staff Associations

The Social Security Assistants Branch (SSA Branch) of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association and the Government Social Security Staff Association have expressed grave concerns on the merger proposal, or the taking up of social security duties by the WW grade, as such arrangements would inevitably affect the career prospect of the SSA grade. The Social Security Officers' Branch has also raised concern about the WW grade's proposal.

(c) **Long-term Direction for the Provision of Social Security Services**

When SWD re-engineers, re-prioritises and rationalizes the social security work, the establishment of the SSA grade will also be reviewed. From the management's point of view, it is not prudent and practical to merge the WW grade with the SSA grade under such an uncertain and fluid situation. SWD would revisit the issue at an appropriate time when all the new initiatives and rationalization programmes of the social security work have been fully implemented.

22. The arrangements for surplus WWs as set out in paragraph 16 provide SWD with greater flexibility in the deployment of manpower resources to service units in need of additional hands. At present, there are 102 surplus WWs. Even if all these surplus WWs are deployed to take up social security work despite the inappropriateness of such an arrangement, SWD considers that it is still inadequate to cope with the increasing CSSA workload and there is a genuine need to recruit NCSC SSAs.

23. In a reply to WW Branch on 22 June 2005, the SSA Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association stated that its approval of the merger proposal would depend on the form of the merger. The inclusion of WW grade is agreeable **on condition that the career prospects of the SSA grade staff would not be affected**. With the constraints of limited resources, SWD considers that the merger proposal would inevitably affect the career prospects of the SSA grade.

24. All in all, in reviewing the WW grade's call for a merger with the SSA grade, SWD has to consider the overall manpower situation of the SSA grade, the long-term direction for the provision of social security services, the development of the affected grades, the relevant experience and expertise of staff involved, the overall resources availability of the department, and the demand for social welfare services. The views of the related staff associations are only one of the considerations. SWD would fully consider all the relevant factors and handle the issue in a cautious manner.