

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)841/04-05
(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PS/1/04

Panel on Welfare Services

**Subcommittee on review of the
Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme**

**Minutes of the 2nd meeting
held on Monday, 10 January 2005 at 2:30 pm
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

Members present : Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung (Chairman)
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, BBS, JP
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, JP
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung

Member absent : Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC

Public Officers attending : Ms Salina YAN
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Elderly Services and Social Security)

Mrs Brenda FUNG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Elderly Services and Social Security) 2

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Mrs Agnes Allcock, JP
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration)

Mrs Rachel Cartland, JP
Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Social Security)

Mr CHENG Chok-man
Chief Social Security Officer (Social Security) 1
Social Welfare Department

Mr LAI Shiu-bor
Chief Social Security Officer (Social Security) 2
Social Welfare Department

Miss Cecilla LI
Chief Social Work Officer (Family and Child Welfare) 1
Social Welfare Department

**Deputations
by invitation** : Hong Kong Association for the Survivors of Women Abuse
(Kwan Fook)

Ms NG Siu-ha
Committee Member

Ms LAM Wong-yau
Member

Ms LIU Ngan-fung

Society for Community Organization

Ms CHAN Wan-ling
Representative of the Children Rights Concern Group

Ms SZE Lai-shan
Community Organizer

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Dr WONG Hung
Researcher, Basic Needs Study

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Mr CHUA Hoi-wai
Business Director, Policy Research and Advocacy

Ms Mariana CHAN
Chief Officer, Policy Research and Advocacy

The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong

Mr WONG Kwai-yau
Supervisor

Ms LAW Suk-kwan
Assistant Director

Concerning CSSA Review Alliance

Ms HO Wai-ling
Representative

Ms WONG Shek-hung
Social Worker

Visual-Impaired Dynamic

Ms LEE Kwai-ho
Member

Mr LAM Chun-tak
Member

New Women Arrivals League

Ms YEUNG Mei
Member

Ms NG Suet-kuen
Member

Mr TSANG Chun-yuk
Organizer

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Clerk in attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Miss Mary SO
Senior Council Secretary (2) 8

Miss Maggie CHIU
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

I. Confirmation of minutes
(LC Paper No. CB(2)570/04-05)

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2004 were confirmed.

II. The basic needs of children
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)539/04-05(01) to (04) and CB(2)587/04-05(01) to (03))

2. The Chairman declared that he was a member of the steering committee to study the basic needs of the people of Hong Kong set up by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS).

Views of the deputations

3. The Chairman invited deputations to give their views on the basic needs of children. Details of the views of the deputations were set out in the following submissions (LC Paper Nos. CB(2)539/04-05(02) to (04) and CB(2)587/04-05(01) to (03)). The views of the Visually-Impaired Dynamic, which had not provided a written submission, were summarised as follows -

- (a) after-school learning, such as supplementary tuition classes, and special grants for attending extra-curricular activities should be provided to needy students on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA); and
- (b) barrier-free computer equipment should be provided to needy visually-impaired students on CSSA.

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Discussion

4. Mr Frederick FUNG asked the Administration whether it would consider the following suggestions made by HKCSS so as to better meet the basic needs of children -

- (a) the monthly standard rates for children should include allowance to enable each recipient in school living with his/her family to buy two newspapers per week;
- (b) each CSSA household comprising child(ren) in school should be provided with special grants to purchase a computer and cover monthly Internet charges;
- (c) the monthly standard rates for children should include allowance to enable each recipient in school to attend one cultural/leisure/sports activity organised by an educational or non-governmental organisation (NGOs) every three months;
- (d) the monthly standard rates for children should include allowance to allow each recipient to seek medical treatment from providers in the private sector, such as Chinese medicine practitioners and bone-setters, three times a year; and
- (e) each CSSA household should be provided with special grants to cover telephone installation fees and monthly telephone charges.

5. Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Elderly Services and Social Security) (DSHWF(ES&SS)) responded that she could not give an answer to Mr FUNG's question raised in paragraph 4 above at this stage, as the Administration had only received HKCSS's basic needs study last Thursday/Friday. DSHWF(ES&SS) however pointed out that items such as those mentioned in paragraph 4(b) and (c) above had already been covered by other services provided for needy children, details of which were set out in paragraphs 15 and 16 of the Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)539/04-05(01)). To further facilitate needy students' learning with information technology (IT) and to enable them to participate in extra-curricular activities organised by the school, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) had undertaken to explore with schools on the possibility of extending the opening hours of their computer rooms and setting aside a portion of their funding to subsidise those students who could not afford to pay for their school-related activity fees. Considerable resources were also invested under the Bridging the Digital Divide initiative to provide school with personal computers to lend to

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students to use at home. DSHWF(ES&SS) further said that apart from standard rates, a full range of special grants were also payable to children on CSSA to meet their educational expenses, details of which were set out in paragraph 9 of the Administration's paper.

6. As regards providing an allowance in the monthly standard rates for children on CSSA to seek medical treatment from private providers, DSHWF(ES&SS) said that this needed to be examined in greater detail as all CSSA recipients were presently given free medical services in all public clinics/hospitals. On the suggestions of providing an allowance for school children on CSSA to purchase two newspapers per week and providing each CSSA family with special grants to cover monthly telephone charges, DSHWF(ES&SS) said that the current monthly standard rates for CSSA children and households were considered to be adequate to cover these expenses. Despite the aforesaid, DSHWF(ES&SS) said that arrangements were made by the Administration to meet with HKCSS to understand more the latter's basic needs study.

7. DSHWF(ES&SS) pointed out that the Administration attached great importance to ensuring that the basic needs of children on CSSA were met. Notably, children on CSSA were provided with higher standard rates than other able-bodied recipients, in addition to the special grants on education-related expenses. Despite the fiscal constraints that the Government was facing, the welfare budget of the Government had not been reduced. In 2003-2004, a total of \$17.3 billion was spent on CSSA payments to some 522 460 recipients. This represented 10% of the Government's total operating revenue, or 62% of Hong Kong's total salaries tax income. Coupled with the Old Age Allowance and Disability Allowance under the Social Security Allowance Scheme, social security payments and the associated costs took up about 80% of Hong Kong's salaries tax income.

8. DSHWF(ES&SS) also took the opportunity to respond to the concerns raised by the New Women Arrivals League about the long time required to be provided with public housing rental (PRH) units. DSHWF(ES&SS) pointed out that according to the Housing Department (HD), the waiting time for the eligible applicants to obtain PRH units had shortened from six years in the past to two to three years at present. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) also made recommendations to HD for arranging housing assistance, such as compassionate rehousing and splitting of PRH households, to help people with genuine housing need and social/medical ground.

9. In response to the suggestion made by the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong about launching a personal growth and development

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plan for children on CSSA aged 12 and below, Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration) said that there was no need for such as staff of the Social Security Field Units of SWD would refer any member of a CSSA family requiring welfare assistance to the social workers of the Integrated Family Services Centres for follow-up.

10. Mr Frederick FUNG expressed disappointment about the non-committal response made by the Administration with regard to the HKCSS's proposal on better meeting the basic needs of children on CSSA. Mr FUNG surmised that this was a sign that helping the needy children would not be a major focus of the upcoming Chief Executive (CE) Policy Address to be delivered on 12 January 2005. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung expressed similar concerns, and voiced his dissatisfaction with the Administration's response.

11. Assistant Director of Social Service (Social Security) (ADSW(SS)) responded that although the Administration was not in a position to comment on the upcoming CE Policy Address, it should be pointed out that both CE and the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food had made it very clear in the recent past that the Government as a whole accorded a very high priority to addressing the needs of children in poverty and had in fact made it very clear the Policy Address would look into such a problem. In the Administration's view, CSSA was a safety net to meet the basic needs of the needy. To meet the developmental needs of children, there were other ways and means available that were more appropriate to be provided, say, through the educational system, as mentioned by DSHWF(ES&SS) earlier at the meeting. The Administration considered that CSSA recipients could use their standard rates to cover monthly telephone charges given the cheapness of the charges. The Administration also did not consider it justified to raise the monthly payment rates to meet the private medical needs of the recipients, considering that seeking treatment from private providers was not a basic need and that all CSSA recipients were entitled to free medical services provided by all public clinics/hospitals.

12. DSHWF(ES&SS) supplemented that a more comprehensive and holistic approach would be adopted by the Administration to address the needs of children in poverty. Apart from setting up an inter-departmental commission to alleviate poverty as mentioned by CE recently, more targeted measures would be implemented to assist the deprived children and youth. For instance, efforts would be made to provide timely assistance in terms of better co-ordinated medical and other social support to children and their parents in need, especially children in their formative age.

13. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan urged the Administration to re-consider HKCSS's proposal of including the five basic need items in the calculation of monthly

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payment rates for families/children, and to reinstate the special grants and supplements for able-bodied adults/children which had been abolished following the review of the CSSA Scheme in 1998.

14. DSHWF(ES&SS) reiterated that the Administration would need to discuss with HKCSS on their recommendations to address the basic needs of children as well as to listen to the views of the community on such before coming to a decision on whether the existing payment rates to children should be adjusted. As to reinstating those special grants and supplements for able-bodied adults/children which had been abolished following the review of the CSSA Scheme in 1998, the Administration had no plan to do so. DSHWF(ES&SS) pointed out that such abolition was made following wide public consultation and endorsement from the Executive Council. It was, however, worth pointing out that the CSSA system at present had built in components that took special care of the needs of children. For instance, the standard rate was higher for children than for able-bodied adults. There were special grants covering school fees, meals, transport fares, examination fees and an annual one-off grant of up to \$3,810 that covered school-related expenses.

Admin 15. Mr Fred LI said that the Administration should provide a paper explaining why it considered the existing monthly payment rates were sufficient to cover the five items which HKCSS had pointed out were basic needs for children.

16. Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that the assistance provided to needy children, as outlined in the Administration's paper, fell far short of meeting their needs. For instance, she could not see how the IT assistance currently provided by the Administration could fully meet students' learning with IT if they were not provided with their own computers at home. Another example was that the CSSA system ignored the needs of some children who wished to attend courses not offered by the nine years' free and universal education up to Secondary 3 level, say, those organised by the Vocational Training Council which were fee-charging.

17. Ms LI Fung-ying asked about the utilisation of the Digital Bridge project which loaned laptop computers to secondary school students who did not have computers at homes and how effective the recycling of used computers from NGOs was in helping students who could not afford to have their own computer at home. Ms LI further said that the Administration should squarely look into the problem that arising from the implementation of the seven-year residence requirement for CSSA, the welfare of children on CSSA had been undermined by their new arrival parents living on their children's social security benefits.

18. DSHWF(ES&SS) responded that under the Bridging Digital Divide initiative, \$200 million were spent to provide 450 secondary schools with over

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21 000 set of personal computers for the school to lend to students to use at home. The utilisation rate currently stood at about 70%. As regards the recycling of used computers to help students who could not afford to have their own computer at home, DSHWF(ES&SS) said that according to her understanding, EMB was planning to upgrade the computers at schools and there would be a pool of used computers for recycling to needy students. On the problem of new arrival parents being forced to live on the CSSA payments of their children because of the seven-year residence requirement for CSSA, DSHWF(ES&SS) said that in cases with genuine need, the Director of Social Welfare could exercise discretion to waive the residence requirement for the new arrival parents. A pamphlet had been published by SWD to explain how the waiver would be exercised and the types of other support and assistance which were available to new arrivals.

19. Miss CHAN Yuen-han remarked that the fact that the utilisation rate of the Digital Bridge project currently stood at about 70% was no testament that the project was able to satisfy need, as students needed to travel to pick up the laptop computers which involved costs.

20. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan proposed to move the following motion which was supported by all members present at the meeting -

“本委員會要求政府釐定綜援金額時應包括社聯建議的五個兒童基本需要項目及即時恢復長期資助金以補助現時綜援金額不足以應付基本生活需要的處境。”

(Translation)

“That this Panel requests the Administration to include the five basic need items for children proposed by HKCSS in determining the CSSA payment rates for children and to immediately reinstate the long-term supplement so as to make up for the shortfalls of the existing payment rates in meeting the basic needs of children.”

III. Any other business

21. Members agreed to discuss the following items at the next meeting scheduled for 17 February 2005 at 8:30 am -

- (a) Briefing by the Census and Statistics Department on the household expenditure survey for CSSA households;
- (b) Continue discussion on the basic needs of children on CSSA; and

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- (c) Progress of the Administration's review of the CSSA Scheme.

The Clerk was also requested to draw up a list of outstanding issues for discussion in future meetings.

22. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 4:30 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
7 February 2005