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Panel on Welfare Services
Subcommittee on Poverty Alleviation

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 5 March 2009

Internet access charges for
Comprehensive Social Security Assistance recipients

Purpose

This paper gives a brief account of the views and concerns expressed by the Panel on Welfare Services (the Panel) and the Subcommittee on Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme on issues relating to the provision of Internet access charges under the CSSA Scheme.

Types of CSSA payments

2. According to the Administration, the CSSA Scheme is a safety net of last resort for those who cannot support themselves financially, which is non-contributory, cash-based and public revenue-funded. The CSSA Scheme comprises two key elements –

- (a) different standard rates for broad categories of recipients to meet their normal day-to-day basic needs (food, clothing and footwear, fuel and light, durable goods, etc), with higher rates going to children, elderly and people with disabilities or in ill health; and
- (b) a wide range of special grants to meet the recipients' special needs on an individual basis. These special grants cover rent, water/sewage charge, schooling expenses, child care centre fees and burial expenses. Recipients who are old, disabled or medically certified to be in ill-health are entitled to other special grants to meet their special needs, such as glasses, dentures, medically recommended diets, removal expenses, medical and surgical appliances. Most of the special grants are made on a

reimbursement basis to meet actual costs while others are paid on a flat-rate basis or up to the prescribed ceilings. In addition, a monthly single parent supplement is payable to single parents and an annual long-term supplement is payable to cases involving the elderly, the disabled and those medically certified to be in ill-health.

Deliberations by members

3. Although the subject of the provision of Internet access charges under the CSSA Scheme was not discussed at meetings of the Panel and the Subcommittee, members had time and again expressed concern that the basic items covered under the Scheme were incompatible with present needs. Some members pointed out that it was now very common for students to use the Internet to do homework, and the lack of access to the Internet by CSSA children would impede their learning. As a result, some CSSA recipients had to meet the expenses within the standard payment rates. The Administration should recognise that Internet access charges were necessary and basic items to be provided for in the standard rates of CSSA. Members strongly urged the Administration to keep pace with present needs in determining the items and their relative importance covered by the Social Security Assistance Index of Prices¹ (SSAIP) and the level of CSSA payments.

4. The Administration advised that the CSSA Scheme had taken care of the special needs of children, though not their development needs. Notably, the standard rates for children were higher than those of able-bodied adults. On the use of the Internet by children on CSSA, many schools and community centres provided computers with Internet access for free use by their students and the public respectively.

5. At the Panel's meeting on 10 November 2008, some members raised the concern again. The Administration advised that it could look into the aspect of Internet access charges when conducting the next round of the Household Expenditure Survey (HES) on CSSA households in 2009-2010 under which the relative weighting of individual items of goods and services covered by SSAIP would be updated. The Administration further advised that the next round of HES on CSSA households was not a comprehensive review of CSSA, but to update the latest expenditure patterns of CSSA households and the weighting of SSAIP. The preparation for the next HES on CSSA households had started; the survey would commence in 2009-2010 and was expected to be completed in 2010-2011. The Administration subsequently provided updated information on the work plan for and scope of the next round of HES on CSSA

¹ The CSSA rates are adjusted according to the movement of the Social Security Assistance Index of Prices (SSAIP). SSAIP is compiled by the Census and Statistics Department on a monthly basis to measure inflation according to the expenditure pattern of CSSA households.

households to the Panel in January 2009 vide LC Paper No. CB(2)749/08-09(01).

6. Members generally took the view that a review of the items of goods and services to be covered by SSAIP was more important than updating the relative expenditure shares of those items currently covered by SSAIP. To ensure that the CSSA payments could meet the daily expenditure of the recipients, the Administration should conduct a comprehensive review of the CSSA rates expeditiously.

7. In its report submitted to the Panel, the Subcommittee recommended, among other things, that the Administration should conduct a comprehensive review of the CSSA Scheme expeditiously, including the items which should be classified as basic needs for the purpose of inclusion in the CSSA standard rates, with a view to ensuring that the different standard CSSA rates are adequate to meet the essential needs of different categories of recipients, in particular children and elderly on CSSA.

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