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Panel on Welfare Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 14 December 2009**

**New Dawn Project for single parent/family carer recipients
under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme**

Purpose

This paper summarises past discussions by the Panel on Welfare Services (the Panel) and the Subcommittee on Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme (the Subcommittee) of the Panel on the launch and implementation of the New Dawn (ND) Project for single parents and child carers on CSSA.

Background

2. The ND Project was launched in April 2006. Before that, the Administration had launched the Ending Exclusion Project (EEP) from March 2002 to March 2006 to assist CSSA single parent recipients with children aged below 15 to maximize their chances of participating in social and economic activities. The EEP was a voluntary programme comprising an employment assistance programme, as well as childcare and enhanced support services. According to the Administration, the ND Project is specifically designed as an employment assistance programme for single parents and child carers on CSSA whose youngest children are aged 12 to 14. It aims to assist the participants to enhance their capacity for self-help, integrate into the community and move towards self-reliance through engagement in work.

3. Under the existing arrangements, single parents and child carers on CSSA with their youngest child aged below 12 are not required to work. However, for those recipients whose youngest children are aged 12 to 14, they are required to join the ND Project to actively seek paid employment with working hours of not less than 32 per month. When their youngest child reaches the age of 15, such CSSA recipients will then need to enroll in the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme to find full-time jobs entailing not less than 120 working hours and earning not less than \$1,450 per month.

Review of arrangements for single parent recipients under the CSSA Scheme

4. At its meeting on 24 May 2005, the Subcommittee was briefed on the Administration's initial review of the arrangements for single parent families and the options to help single parents on CSSA move towards self-reliance and reduce the risk of social exclusion through engagement in work. The Administration recommended that –

- (a) single parents on CSSA with the youngest child aged six to 14 would be required to seek at least part-time employment. The same requirement would apply to family carers who claimed CSSA on grounds of the need to look after young children. In this connection, it recommended that –
 - (i) the Social Welfare Department (SWD) would seek a Lotteries Fund grant to run a pilot scheme enforcing the part-time work requirement for single parents and child carers on CSSA with the youngest child aged six to 14, and provide them with co-ordinated employment assistance and other child care support services to help them find work and overcome barriers to work;
 - (ii) EEP should be phased out; and
 - (iii) SWD should commission non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to run basic skills and skills-upgrading training programmes/courses in the form of Intensive Employment Assistance Projects (IEAPs) or with grants from the Lotteries Fund for not-job-ready single parents with young children;
- (b) no change would be made to the eligibility criteria for the standard rates for single parents, but the single parent supplement would only be paid to single parents earning at least \$1,430 a month and with at least one child aged below 15; and
- (c) no change would be made to the provision of disregarded earnings, pending the results of a separate review to be conducted during 2005.

5. The Subcommittee considered the proposal unacceptable having regard to the special difficulties faced by single parents in finding employment and the inadequacy of after school care support services for these single parents. The Subcommittee also objected to the proposed arrangement of deducting \$200 from the CSSA payments if the single parents and family carers failed to comply with the mandatory requirement to work. In view of the special needs of single parent families, the Administration should let single parents decide when they were ready to seek employment. The Subcommittee expressed unanimous opposition to the proposed scheme at the meeting on 24 May 2005.

6. In the light of the comments of the Subcommittee, the Administration revised its proposals to require only single parents and child carers on CSSA with the youngest child aged 12 to 14, instead of six to 14, to seek at least part-time employment (i.e. jobs entailing not less than 32 hours' work a month). In addition, there would be no change to the existing arrangements for the single parents supplement, and a package of arrangements consisting of a mandatory employment assistance programme specifically for single parent recipients, and basic skills and skills upgrading training would be launched by SWD to help these people to find work. The Subcommittee discussed the revised proposals at three subsequent meetings on 22 July, 31 October and 22 November 2005.

7. The Administration advised that in response to the call for more employment support for single parents and family carers with no or limited work experience, a ND Project (which was a trial Employment Assistance Project including 20 IEAPs with a \$30 million funding support from the Lotteries Fund) would be launched for a period of 18 months commencing from April 2006. The Administration stressed that the sole reason for requiring single parents and family carers with the youngest child aged between 12 to 14 to seek employment was to help them achieve self-reliance. No single parents/family carers would be penalised if they made genuine efforts to find employment. Exemptions from seeking employment would be allowed where justified, for instance, the recently bereaved, those who had recently been victims of domestic violence and those who had to care for disabled family members.

8. The Subcommittee, however, maintained the view that the Administration should abort the proposal as there were not enough part-time jobs in the market suitable for these single parents and family carers on CSSA. The Subcommittee requested the Administration to revise the proposals to help single parents and family carers achieve self-reliance by taking into account participation in voluntary work. Members also considered that training should be regarded as reasons for exemption to seek employment, and that single parents and family carers should be encouraged, rather than forced, to seek employment.

9. Notwithstanding the Subcommittee's repeated request for aborting the proposals, the Administration advised that the ND Project would be launched as proposed, and a review of the Project would be conducted at the end of the 18-month implementation period. The Subcommittee expressed grave disappointment at the Administration's decision in taking forward the proposals. Two motions were passed at the meetings on 31 October and 22 November 2005 to condemn the Administration for ignoring the views of the Subcommittee, and for insisting on bypassing the Legislative Council (LegCo) in the implementation of the ND Project and disregarding the interests and well-being of single parent families. The motions also reiterated that the Government must abort the Project.

Launch of the ND Project

10. With a \$30 million funding support from the Lotteries Fund, the ND Project was launched in April 2006 for a period of 18 months. It included personalised employment assistance provided by SWD staff to help participants overcome work barriers and secure paid employment as early as possible, and ND IEAPs organized by NGOs to provide tailor made employment assistance services including basic skills and skills upgrading training to equip those participants with no or limited work experience.

11. According to the Administration, as at end March 2007, a total of 7 886 participants had joined the ND Project. Of these, a total of 2 215 participants secured paid jobs, with 836 taking up full-time paid employment and 1 379 part-time paid employment. The success rate was about 28%. The number of participants who eventually left the CSSA net after successfully securing employment was 158. The participants who successfully secured employment mainly worked as cleaners, services workers, shop sales, domestic helpers and in other elementary occupations. The average monthly wage was \$4,400 for full-time employment and \$1,600 for part-time employment.

Evaluation study on the ND Project

12. SWD commissioned the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong (HKU) to conduct an evaluation study of the ND Project. The research team commenced its work in August 2006. The Administration issued the findings of the evaluation study of the ND Project for single parents and child carers on CSSA (the Study) on 31 May 2007. The Panel discussed the Study with the Administration and received views from deputations at the meetings on 3 and 27 July 2007.

13. Members were advised that the survey was conducted from November 2006 to March 2007 with 1 685 targeted participants interviewed. Amongst them, 63.6% were single parents and 36.4% child carers. Members were further advised that the Study showed that nearly half of those participating in the ND Project found at least a job within half a year. Over 85% of these successful job-seekers took up the offer and most of them (91.8%) were still working at the time of interview. The recommendations set out by the research team were as follows –

- (a) the ND Project (i.e. the employment assistance programmes/ND IEAPs) should be continued;
- (b) more sharing of experiences and good practices among staff working in the ND Project would be helpful;

- (c) the level of sanction could be increased by doubling the amount every half a year until it reached the limit of \$800 per month. The amount of sanction could also be administered as a percentage of total CSSA payment received if administratively feasible;
- (d) apart from the requirement to seek employment actively, participants could be required to participate in job attachment or training to increase their employability;
- (e) the working hour requirement for those with youngest child aged between 12 and 14 could be gradually increased to 80-100 hours per month;
- (f) for those with youngest child studying in primary school and aged between six and 11, they should start joining the ND Project. However, the working hour requirement could be less than 60 hours per month; and
- (g) special considerations should be made for the targeted participants living in Tin Shui Wai where the employment rate of the participants had been low.

14. The Administration advised that the Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) had a preliminary discussion on the findings of the Study, and suggested that the consultant should enrich the Study by conducting case studies over a longer period and providing analysis for further discussion. Having regard to the favourable response of the ND Project and positive findings and recommendations made in the evaluation study, the project would be continued in its existing mode of operation for 30 months pending the further studies to be undertaken by the Study Team of HKU and the Administration.

15. Members expressed grave concern about the recommendations of the Study to raise the level of sanction and the working hour requirement. They pointed out that many single parents and child carers on CSSA were willing to work, but the number of jobs available for single parents and child carers was limited because of the need to take care of their families. Moreover, the average monthly wage (\$4,400) for full-time employment fell below the wage levels for cleaning workers used under the Wage Protection Movement. Members took the view that concrete measures should be introduced to assist these CSSA recipients to overcome barriers to work and to ensure that they could receive reasonable wages when seeking employment. In these members' view, the most effective way to assist these CSSA recipients to move towards self-reliance was to offer tailor-made training programmes for them and upgrade their skills and employability. In addition, the Administration should foster the development of social enterprises to provide more job opportunities for them.

16. The Administration advised that the average hourly rates of jobs secured by the ND Project participants were comparable to the wage level to which reference was

made under the Wage Protection Movement and were considered reasonable. Some participants received lower wages because they took up part-time jobs. The Administration further advised that SWD had commissioned NGOs to operate ND IEAPs under the ND Project to provide tailor-made employment assistance services including basic skills and skills upgrading training to equip ND Project participants with no or limited work experience. The Administration considered that the initial outcomes of ND IEAPs were encouraging.

17. Members also expressed concern about the requirement of working not less than 32 hours under the ND Project. Having regard to the difficulties faced by single parents and child carers in finding jobs, some members suggested that performing voluntary work and attending training courses should be regarded as satisfying the work requirement under the ND Project.

18. The Administration explained that single parents and child carers on CSSA joining the ND Project were only required to seek paid employment with working hours of not less than 32 hours per month, i.e. an average of one to two hours per day, irrespective of the wage levels. It was considered that the ND Project participants could strike a proper balance between working and taking care of their families.

19. Members were also advised that about 10 000 CSSA recipients had been exempted from joining the ND Project for various reasons, such as having the need to take care of their vulnerable family members. Among the some 12 000 single parents and child carers on CSSA who had no good reasons for exemption, only 8 000 had joined the ND Project. In other words, about 4 000 single parents and child carers had their monthly CSSA payments deducted by \$200 due to refusal to join the ND Project. Members were also advised that \$200 would not be deducted from the CSSA payments of single parent CSSA recipients if they had made genuine efforts in seeking employment.

20. Members considered that the Administration should study the underlying reasons why some single parent CSSA recipients chose not to join the Project. While expressing support for the direction of encouraging single parents and child carers on CSSA to move towards self-reliance, members took the view that the Administration should allow the recipients to decide when they were ready to seek employment. Pending further studies to identify the barriers to work faced by single parents and child carers on CSSA, the Administration should suspend the punitive measures on the CSSA recipients for not joining the ND Project. The Administration explained that taking into account the need to conduct further studies and avoid conveying a misleading message to CSSA recipients that the work requirement would be removed permanently, the Administration considered it inappropriate to make any major changes to the ND Project at the moment. Moreover, in the light of the experience of EEP launched between 2002 and 2006, the participation rate of single parents and child carers would be low if the programme was made voluntary.

21. A motion was passed unanimously at the meeting held on 27 July 2007 urging the Administration to abolish the punitive measures in the ND Project and follow a

direction of encouragement and training to help participants to find jobs, as well as objecting to the recommendations in the Study report concerning enhanced punishment and requiring single parents taking care of children below the age of 12 to join the Project.

22. The Administration advised that the Study Team was finalizing the findings of the Study and would conduct further researches to enrich the Study. The terms of reference of the Study included analyses on the reasons why some single parents and child carers on CSSA chose not to join the Project and the improvement measures which should be introduced to facilitate their job-seeking efforts. The Administration stressed that it had no established position on the findings and recommendations made in the evaluation study. It would continue with the ND Project in its existing mode of operation for 30 months. In the meantime, further studies and analyses would be conducted as suggested by SWAC. The Administration would revert to the Panel once it had come up with any proposals on the mode of operation of the ND Project.

Relevant papers

23. A list of relevant papers is at the **Appendix**. Members are invited to access the LegCo's website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk/> for details.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
8 December 2009

Relevant Papers/Documents

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Papers</u>
Subcommittee on Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme	24 May 2005	Administration's paper LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(01) Minutes of meeting LC Paper No. CB(2)2052/04-05
	22 July 2005	Administration's paper LC Paper No. CB(2)2310/04-05(02) Minutes of meeting LC Paper No. CB(2)2498/04-05
	31 October 2005	Administration's paper LC Paper No. CB(2)175/05-06(01) Minutes of meeting LC Paper No. CB(2)737/05-06
	22 November 2005	Administration's paper LC Paper No. CB(2)473/05-06(01) Minutes of meeting LC Paper No. CB(2)738/05-06
Panel on Welfare Services	3 July 2007	Administration's Paper LC Paper No. CB(2)2030/06-07(01) Minutes of meeting LC Paper No. CB(2)2773/06-07
	27 July 2007	Administration's Paper LC Paper No. CB(2)2522/06-07(01) Minutes of meeting LC Paper No. CB(2)220/07-08