

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)220/07-08
(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

Panel on Welfare Services

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Friday, 27 July 2007, at 4:00 pm
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building**

Members present : Hon CHAN Yuen-han, SBS, JP (Chairman)
Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, BBS, JP
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, SBS, JP
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung

Members absent : Hon Bernard CHAN, GBS, JP
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, GBS, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum, JP
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, SBS, JP
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Dr Hon KWOK Ka-ki

Public Officers attending : Mr Matthew CHEUNG, GBS, JP
Secretary for Labour and Welfare

Ms Carol YIP, JP
Deputy Secretary for Labour and Welfare (Welfare) 2

Mr Stephen FISHER, JP
Director of Social Welfare

Miss Nancy LAW, JP
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration)

Mr CHAN Tak-kin
Chief Social Security Officer (Social Security) 4
Social Welfare Department

**Deputations
by invitation**

: Christian Action

Mr Sam KWONG
Assistant Director

The Boy's and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong

Mr WONG Kwai-yu
Supervisor

Concerning Group for Women Poverty

Ms HO Foei-lin

Justice & Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic
Diocese

Mr CHOY Man-kit
Project Officer

港島單親互助社

Ms CHENG Sau-lan
Member

Ms FUNG Hoi-yee
Member

Hong Kong Christian Institute

Mr Daniel YAU
Project Secretary Trainee

New Women Arrivals League

Mr YICK Man-kin

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Ms Mariana CHAN
Chief Officer

Concerning CSSA Review Alliance

Mr AU YEUNG Tat-chor
Community Organiser

CSSA Action Group

Ms YEUNG Suet-lam
Member

Clerk in attendance : Miss Betty MA
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Mr Chris LAI
Senior Council Secretary (2) 7

Miss Maggie CHIU
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

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I. Further discussion on the evaluation study on the New Dawn Project
[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)2030/06-07(01) and CB(2)2522/06-07(01) to (02)]

The Chairman said that the meeting was held to further discuss with the Administration the evaluation study on the New Dawn (ND) Project for single parents and child carers on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) (the Study).

2. Secretary for Labour and Welfare (SLW) said that at the special meeting on 3 July 2007 when the Administration reported to the Panel on the findings of the Study, members and deputations had expressed grave concern about the recommendations of the report. The Administration was requested to revert to the Panel and provide supplementary information on the Study, which was set out in the Administration's paper. SLW said 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

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studies over a longer period and providing analysis for further discussion. He stressed that the Administration had yet to formulate a stance or decide on the recommendations of the report. The Administration 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 before the Administration could consider the findings of the Study. In view of the implications on single parents and child carers on CSSA, the Administration would make very careful deliberations before proposing any changes to the ND Project.

3. SLW added that according to the Study, the ND Project was generally well-received by the participants. He said that the Project was found effective in assisting single parents and child carers on CSSA to find jobs and move towards self-reliance. Through engagement in work, single parent CSSA recipients could, in addition to taking care of their families, rejoin workforce to increase family income, broaden their social network and raise their self-esteem.

4. The Chairman said that although deputations were invited to attend the meeting, she would first invite questions from members and response from the Administration as the deputations had already presented their views at the last meeting. She would then invite deputations to provide supplementary views.

Discussion

Support services for single parents and child carers on CSSA

5. Ms LI Fung-ying expressed concern about the adequacy of support services to meet the needs of single parent CSSA recipients. Referring to the Administration's paper, Ms LI requested the Administration to provide further information on the utilisation rates of child care services and after-school care services in each district.

6. SLW responded that it was difficult, if not impossible, to provide a breakdown of all types of services by districts. Nevertheless, according to the available information, the utilisation rates of after-school care services varied across districts, and ranged from about 60% to 90%. The Administration would provide more detailed information about the utilisation rates of child care services and after-school services, if available, after the meeting.

7. Mr TAM Yiu-chung expressed support for the ND Project to encourage single parent CSSA recipients to move towards self-reliance, but hoped that adequate support services would be provided for them to overcome barriers to work. He said that to his understanding, some kindergartens allowed the kids to stay behind until their parents came to take them home after work. The Administration should study the feasibility of providing similar services for single parents and child carers to enable them to work.

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8. SLW responded that the primary objective of requiring employable single parents and child carers on CSSA to work was to help them achieve self-reliance and social integration. The Administration would endeavour to provide adequate support for them to seek employment.

Employment of single parents and child carers on CSSA

9. Ms LI Fung-ying noted from the Administration's paper that from April 2006 to end May 2007, only 2 640 out of 8 266 participants had secured paid jobs after joining the ND Project. The average monthly wage was \$4,400 for full-time employment, which fell below the wage levels for cleaning workers and security guards used under the Wage Protection Movement (WPM). To prevent single parent CSSA recipients from moving from welfare to working poverty, Ms LI said that concrete measures should be introduced to ensure that these recipients could receive reasonable wages when seeking employment.

10. SLW responded that the average hourly rates of jobs secured by the ND Project participants were considered reasonable. Citing general cleaners as an example, the average hourly rate received by the Project participants was \$24.4, which was comparable to the wage level to which reference was made under WPM. SLW explained that some participants received lower wages because they took up part-time jobs. He considered the ND Project effective in encouraging single parent CSSA recipients to take the first step to seek employment. The Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) would further assist these recipients to move towards self-reliance through better integration of training programmes and employment support.

11. Dr Fernando CHEUNG expressed reservation about the recommendations of the Study to raise the level of sanction and the working hour requirement. He noted with concern that jobs available for single parents and child carers were largely low-paid menial work, as witnessed by the small number of ND Project participants who could leave the CSSA net after securing employment.

12. Echoing similar views, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan said that it was difficult for single parent CSSA recipients to seek employment because of the small number of suitable job vacancies in the market and employers' preference for younger workers. He said that given that the monthly "no-deduction" limit for disregarded earnings under the CSSA Scheme would be \$800 and single parents joining the ND Project were required to work for not less than 32 hours a month, the hourly rate of employment would be about \$25. Since the average hourly wage for part-time domestic helpers ranged from \$40 to \$50, the level of "no-deduction" limit should be raised accordingly to provide a greater incentive for single parents on CSSA to seek employment.

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13. Mr LEE added that the most effective way to assist single parents and child carers on CSSA to move towards self-reliance was to upgrade their skills and employability. He suggested that tailor-made training programmes should be provided for single parents and child carers to obtain qualifications equivalent to secondary five standard.

14. SLW responded that the Administration had attached great importance to upgrading skills and employability of local workforce through training and retraining programmes. LWB was actively deliberating new measures to assist the disadvantaged, including single parent CSSA recipients, to move from welfare to self-reliance through better integration of welfare and labour policies and strategies.

15. Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration) (DDSW(A)) added that the Social Welfare Department (SWD) had commissioned non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to operate New Dawn Intensive Employment Assistance Projects (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. She said that the initial outcomes of ND IEAPs were encouraging. Expressing disappointment at the Administration's response, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan considered that ND IEAPs were far from effective to upgrade the skills and employability of single parents and child carers on CSSA.

16. Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that some of the ND Project participants joining ND IEAPs/Employment Assistance programme under the ND Project expressed disappointment at the effectiveness of the services. Hence, the Administration should review and improve these services. He considered that the Administration should also have constant communication with the operating agencies of ND IEAPs, service users and relevant departments to solicit views on the areas of improvements to be made to the ND Project. Dr CHEUNG said that a meeting with the relevant stakeholders should be held to identify ways to enrich and improve the Study.

17. SLW responded that the Administration was prepared to solicit views from the deputations. He would be happy to meet with single parents and child carers on CSSA to better understand their difficulties. He stressed that the research team of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) would continue to improve the Study after taking into account the views and suggestions raised by members and deputations.

Work requirement of the ND Project

18. Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that to his understanding, some operating agencies of ND IEAPs had discouraged the participants from taking up jobs with monthly income of less than \$1,600 in order to meet the performance targets set

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by SWD. This defeated the purpose of encouraging single parents on CSSA to work. Dr CHEUNG said that performing voluntary work and attending training courses should be regarded as satisfying the work requirement under the ND Project.

19. SLW responded 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, irrespective of the wage levels.

20. The Chairman said that many single parents and child carers on CSSA were willing to work, but hoped that more assistance could be provided for them to overcome the barriers to work. She said that although single parent CSSA recipients joining the ND Project were required to work not less than 32 hours a month, the number of jobs suitable to them was limited because of the need to take care of their families. The Chairman suggested that the Administration should foster the development of social enterprise (SE) to provide more job opportunities for single parents and child carers.

21. SLW explained that single parents and child carers joining the ND Project were required to work not less than 32 hours a month, i.e., an average of one to two hours per day. The Administration considered that the ND Project participants could strike a proper balance between working and taking care of their families. SLW added that the Administration was mapping out the possible ways to promote the development of SE to provide more job opportunities for the disadvantaged groups, including single parents and child carers.

22. Responding to Dr Fernando CHEUNG, DDSW(A) said that up to end of May 2007, there were some 22 000 single parents and child carers on CSSA who were the service targets of the ND Project. Of these, about 10 000 recipients had been exempted from joining the 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, nearly 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.

23. Noting from the study report that some single parent CSSA recipients reported that they did not join the ND Project because of the need to take care of their families and poor health conditions, Dr Fernando CHEUNG strongly urged the Administration to review the work requirement under the ND Project, and examine critically the underlying reasons why some single parent CSSA recipients chose not to join the Project.

24. Expressing similar views, Ms LI Fung-ying said that the Administration should consider carefully the reasons why some single parents and child carers

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decided not to join the ND Project before imposing sanctions on them.

25. SLW responded that the Administration would further study the reasons why some single parent CSSA recipients chose not to join the ND Project. Responding to Dr Fernando CHEUNG, Director of Social Welfare said that SWD staff would arrange interviews with the target recipients to explain to them details of the Project and enroll them in the Project only if their ineligibility for exemption had been ascertained.

26. Deputy Secretary for Labour and Welfare (Welfare) 2 supplemented that the exemption mechanism was not stringent, as evidenced by the fact that about half of the some 22 000 eligible recipients had been exempted from joining the Project for various reasons, such as the need to take care of vulnerable family members, engagement in paid employment with monthly working hours of 32 or more, and suffering from recent bereavement. The research team of HKU would further study the reasons why some single parents and child carers chose not to join the ND Project.

27. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung expressed strong dissatisfaction at the work requirement of the ND Project, which had stigmatised single parents and child carers on CSSA as an unproductive burden of the society. Given the lack of suitable job opportunities in the labour market and inadequate support services, Mr LEUNG said that single parent CSSA recipients should not be forced to work. He further said that in the absence of a minimum wage, pushing single parents and child carers to work would further drive down the wage levels of low-income workers. Having regard to its negative impact on single parents and their families, the Administration should abort the implementation of the ND Project.

28. While expressing support for the direction of encouraging single parents on CSSA to move towards self-reliance, Mr Albert HO considered that the Administration should allow single parent CSSA recipients to decide when they were ready to seek employment. He suggested that further studies should be conducted to identify the barriers to work faced by single parents and child carers on CSSA. The Administration should suspend the punitive measures on single parent CSSA recipients for not joining the ND Project until it had come up with concrete proposals on the future directions of the Project. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan, Ms LI Fung-ying and Dr Fernando CHEUNG made similar requests.

29. SLW responded that the research team of HKU would conduct further studies on the problems faced by single parents and child carers in finding jobs and their reasons for not joining the ND Project. DDSW(A) supplemented that 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 what improvement measures should be introduced to facilitate their job-seeking efforts.

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30. As regards the work requirement of the ND Project, SLW stressed that \$200 would not be deducted from the CSSA payments of single parent CSSA recipients if they had made genuine efforts in seeking employment. 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, including the work requirement.

31. DDSW(A) supplemented that in the light of the experience of the Ending Exclusion Project launched between 2002 and 2006, the participation rate of single parents and child carers would be low if the programme was made voluntary.

Views of deputations

32. The Chairman invited views from deputations on the Study. The deputations' views are summarised below.

Christian Action

33. Mr Sam KWONG considered that more resources should be allocated to enhance support services for single parents and child carers on CSSA, especially child care services, to facilitate them to seek employment.

The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong

34. Mr WONG Kwai-yau expressed reservation about the Administration's proposal to continue the ND Project in its existing mode of operation for 30 months without prior consultation with the relevant stakeholders. He said that in view of their special circumstances, single parents and child carers on CSSA should not be forced to work. Mr WONG said that further studies should be conducted to identify ways to facilitate single parent CSSA recipients to find and remain in employment.

Justice & Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese

35. Mr CHOY Man-kit objected to the suggestion of increasing the level of sanctions for single parents and child carers on CSSA who chose not to join the ND Project. He said that the Study should look into the difficulties faced by single parents in finding jobs and their reasons for not joining the Project. In his view, the Administration should encourage, rather than force, single parents on CSSA to seek employment.

港島單親互助社

36. Ms CHENG Sau-lan expressed dissatisfaction at the recommendations of

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the Study to impose more punitive measures on single parents and child carers on CSSA who did not join the ND Project, and to require recipients with children aged between six and 11 to start joining the Project. She said that single parent CSSA recipients should not be deprived of their rights to take care of their children, and questioned the grounds for these suggestions.

New Women Arrivals League

37. Mr YICK Man-kin said that new arrival single parents faced more problems in finding jobs. The Administration should remove the punitive measures on single parent CSSA recipients who chose not to join the ND Project. He considered that participation in voluntary work should be regarded as meeting the working hour requirement under the ND Project.

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service

38. Ms Mariana CHAN considered that since the ND Project would continue to operate for 30 months, the Administration should take the opportunity to study how the Project could be further improved. For instance, a case management approach should be adopted to assist single parent CSSA recipients to overcome barriers to employment. Voluntary work should be regarded as an alternative for part-time work as required under the ND Project. Ms CHAN added that the full report of the Study should be provided to the Panel as early as practicable.

Concerning CSSA Review Alliance

39. Given the lack of suitable job opportunities and inadequate child care services for single parents on CSSA, Mr AU YEUNG Tat-chor cast doubt about the effectiveness of the ND Project in helping single parent CSSA recipients to move towards self-reliance. He said that single parents and child carers who needed to take care of their families and could not take up employment should be exempted from joining the ND Project.

CSSA Action Group

40. Ms YEUNG Suet-lam, who had participated in the ND Project, said that it was difficult for single parent CSSA recipients to strike a proper balance between taking care of their children on the one hand and working for a living on the other. She questioned the effectiveness of the Project in assisting the single parents and child carers on CSSA to move out of poverty, as the jobs available to them were largely low-paid menial work.

The Administration's response

41. Responding to the views and suggestions raised by the deputations, SLW made the following points –

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- (a) SWAC was consulted on the Administration's proposal to continue the ND Project in its existing mode of operation for 30 months;
- (b) a new round of applications from NGOs for operating IEAPs under the ND Project would be invited in due course;
- (c) case studies and further analyses would be conducted to enrich the Study and identify the necessary improvements to the ND Project; and
- (d) LWB was actively mapping out new measures to address the problem of poverty and assist the disadvantaged, including single parents and child carers on CSSA, to move towards self-reliance. The Administration would also further promote the development of SE to provide more suitable job opportunities for them.

42. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung remained dissatisfied at the Administration's response and considered that the Administration had turned a deaf ear to the repeated requests raised by members and deputations. Mr LEUNG moved the following motion which was seconded by Mr LEE Cheuk-yan –

"本委員會認為政府應取消欣曉計劃中的懲罰性措施，並循鼓勵及培訓的方向協助參加者就業。本委員會亦反對香港大學研究報告中關於加強懲罰及要求照顧12歲以下子女的單親家長參加該計劃的建議。"

(Translation)

"That this Panel is of the view that the Government should abolish the punitive measures in the New Dawn Project and follow a direction of encouragement and training to help participants find jobs, and this Panel objects to the recommendations in the report of the study conducted by the University of Hong Kong concerning enhanced punishment and requiring single parents taking care of children below the age of 12 to join the Project."

43. The Chairman put the motion to vote. All members present at the meeting voted for and no members voted against the motion. The Chairman declared the motion carried. The Chairman urged the Administration to take into account the views made by members and deputations in reviewing the ND Project and planning its future directions.

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II. Any other business

44. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 5:58 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
31 October 2007