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Panel on Welfare Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 12 April 2012**

**Employment assistance programmes
under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme**

Purpose

This paper gives a brief account of past discussions of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the Panel") and its Subcommittee on the Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme ("the CSSA Subcommittee") formed in the Third Legislative Council ("LegCo") on various employment assistance programmes under the CSSA Scheme.

Background

2. According to the Administration, the CSSA Scheme aims to provide a safety net for those who cannot support themselves financially. To assist CSSA recipients who have the ability to work to become self-reliant, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") provides various employment assistance service programmes to help employable CSSA recipients return to the labour market and achieve self-reliance. These programmes include Integrated Employment Assistance Scheme ("IEAS"), Special Training and Enhancement Programme ("My STEP") and New Dawn Project ("ND Project").

Members' deliberations

IEAS

3. The Panel noted that to encourage and assist able-bodied unemployed CSSA recipients to secure paid employment and move towards self-reliance, SWD implemented the Support for self-reliance Scheme ("SFS Scheme") in June 1999 to provide personalized employment assistance service. In October 2008, SWD launched a three-year IEAS under the SFS Scheme to provide ordinary and intensive employment assistance to help able-bodied unemployed CSSA recipients aged between 15 and 59 secure full-time paid employment. The Panel was informed that from October 2008 to May 2009, a total of 38 193 CSSA recipients joined IEAS following SWD's referral.

4. Members were concerned about the effectiveness of employment assistance service in motivating CSSA recipients to engage in work. According to the Administration, the disregarded earnings ("DE") arrangement under the CSSA Scheme aimed to encourage recipients who had working ability to find jobs and remain in employment. Under the DE arrangement, part of the recipient's earnings from employment would be disregarded when assessing the amount of CSSA payable. To strike a balance between providing CSSA recipients with more financial incentives to find and remain in employment and delaying their exit from the CSSA system, the Administration had set the maximum level of monthly DE at \$2,500. The "no-deduction" limit for DE was raised from \$600 to \$800 and the criteria for allowing CSSA recipients to be eligible for DE was also relaxed from not less than three months having been on CSSA to not less than two months, with effect from 1 December 2007. Notwithstanding members' call on further relaxation, the Administration advised that it had no such plans for the time being as it would need more time to monitor the effectiveness of the measures concerned.

My STEP

5. The Panel noted that My STEP had also been implemented under the SFS Scheme to provide employment services (including counselling and structured motivational or disciplinary training) to unemployed able-bodied CSSA recipients aged between 15 and 29 to help them rejoin the workforce or return to mainstream schooling. My STEP was first implemented in October 2006 in Tin Shui Wai and Yuen Long on a pilot basis, and was subsequently extended to other selected districts.

6. As regards the effectiveness of the programme, the Administration informed the Panel that up to end March 2009, 301 out of 611 participants (about 49%) of the second phase of My STEP had secured full-time employment or returned to mainstream schooling. SWD launched in October 2009 a new phase of My STEP to provide employment service to at least 700 CSSA recipients of the above category.

ND Project

7. Members noted that the ND Project, targeted at single parents and child carers on CSSA with their youngest child aged 12 to 14, was first introduced in 2006. Participants were required to actively seek paid employment with working hours of not less than 32 per month. A sanction of \$200 per month would be deducted from the monthly CSSA payments for refusal to participate in the ND Project without justifiable reasons. When the participants' youngest child reached the age of 15, such CSSA recipients would then need to enroll in the SFS Scheme to find full-time jobs.

8. The CSSA Subcommittee had discussed the proposal at a number of meetings. 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 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. 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 implemented period.

9. At its meeting on 14 December 2009, the Panel was briefed on the outcome of the evaluation study on the ND Project and the Administration's plan to launch a new phase of ND Project in March 2010. The Administration advised that in the new phase, necessary support included short-term financial assistance for job seeking, employment assistance and skills upgrading training and information on child-care services would continue to be provided for the ND Project participants. Similar to other CSSA recipients, the monthly earnings of ND Project participants could be disregarded/partially disregarded under the existing DE arrangements.

10. Members cast doubt about the effectiveness of the ND Project in assisting the participants to move towards self-reliance given that only about 30% of them were able to secure paid jobs and their average hourly wage level was about \$30, as shown from the findings of the study. Some members took the view that as the primary objective of the ND Project was to assist CSSA recipients who were single parents or family carers to integrate into the community, consideration should be given to recognising the performing of community services and attendance at training courses as meeting working requirement under the ND Project. Members also called on the Administration to keep a close eye on the impact of the introduction of a statutory minimum wage level on the low-skilled participants in seeking employment.

11. The Administration advised that it would consider the possibility of integrating various employment assistance programmes under the CSSA Scheme in the long run as recommended by the research findings.

Review of employment assistance programmes

12. At its meeting on 13 December 2010 when the Panel was briefed on the Administration's staffing proposal to retain a supernumerary directorate post to provide support to the work on poverty alleviation in the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the Administration informed members that it would embark on a comprehensive review on the three employment assistance programmes under the CSSA Scheme to provide tailor-made employment assistance services to enhance the employability of different groups of CSSA recipients and seek paid employment. As the current phase of the programmes would expire in September 2011, the Administration considered that it would be high time to comprehensively review to evaluate, from both policy and operational perspectives, the overall effectiveness of the programmes and examine the possibility of integrating them for more effective operation.

13. At the Panel meeting on 21 October 2011, members were briefed that the Administration would conduct a comprehensive review to integrate and improve the various employment assistance programmes for better effectiveness and synergy such that the operating non-governmental organisations would have greater flexibility in deploying resources and provide more suitable assistance to CSSA recipients. The Administration will brief members on the outcome of the review at the forthcoming meeting of the Panel on 12 April 2012.

Relevant papers

14. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
3 April 2012

**Relevant papers on
employment assistance programmes
under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Subcommittee on the Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme	24 May 2005 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Subcommittee on the Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme	22 July 2005 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Subcommittee on the Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme	31 October 2005 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Subcommittee on the Review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme	22 November 2005 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	30 March 2007 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	12 April 2007 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	3 July 2007 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	27 July 2007 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Welfare Services	22 October 2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	14 December 2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	20 October 2010 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	13 December 2010 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	11 July 2011 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	21 October 2011 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes

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