

立法會
Legislative Council

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Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of meeting
held on Monday, 9 March 2020, at 10:45 am
in Conference Room 3 of the Legislative Council Complex

- Members present** : Hon KWONG Chun-yu (Chairman)
Hon SHIU Ka-chun (Deputy Chairman)
Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
Prof Hon Joseph LEE Kok-long, SBS, JP
Hon Michael TIEN Puk-sun, BBS, JP
Hon CHAN Chi-chuen
Hon LEUNG Che-cheung, SBS, MH, JP
Dr Hon KWOK Ka-ki
Hon KWOK Wai-keung, JP
Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung
Hon POON Siu-ping, BBS, MH
Hon Andrew WAN Siu-kin
Hon CHU Hoi-dick
Hon Wilson OR Chong-shing, MH
Dr Hon Pierre CHAN
Hon LUK Chung-hung, JP
Dr Hon CHENG Chung-tai
- Member attending** : Hon Holden CHOW Ho-ding
- Public Officers attending** : Mr LAM Ka-tai, JP
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services)
Social Welfare Department

Ms WONG Yin-yee
Assistant Director (Licensing and Regulation)
Social Welfare Department

Ms Michelle LAM
Assistant Director (Social Security)
Social Welfare Department

Clerk in attendance : Ms Wendy JAN
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Ms Catherina YU
Senior Council Secretary (2) 4

Miss Alison HUI
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

Action

I. Information paper(s) issued since the last meeting
[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)613/19-20(01), CB(2)643/19-20(01) and CB(2)652/19-20(01)]

Members noted that the following papers had been issued since the last meeting:

- (a) Letter dated 4 February 2020 from 22 Members to the Chairmen of a number of Panels requesting the Panels to hold special/joint meetings to discuss issues relating to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 ("COVID-19") epidemic;
- (b) Referral from the Panel on Administration of Justice and Legal Services ("AJLS Panel") regarding Mr IP Kin-yuen's request for the AJLS Panel to discuss matters relating to Care or Protection Orders under the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance (Cap. 213); and
- (c) Letter dated 24 February 2020 from 22 Members to the Chairman of the Panel on Health Services ("HS Panel") and copied to the Chairmen of a number of Panels requesting the HS Panel to hold special/joint meetings to discuss issues relating to the COVID-19 epidemic.

II. Items for discussion at the next meeting

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)652/19-20(02) to (03)]

2. Members agreed to discuss at the next meeting scheduled for 20 April 2020 the following items:

- (a) Extra month of payment to recipients of social security and Individual-based Work Incentive Transport Subsidy as announced in the 2020-2021 Budget; and
- (b) Annual briefing on welfare facility projects funded by the Lotteries Fund.

III. Welfare support for the elderly, the chronically-ill, persons with disabilities and the grass-roots under the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, as well as anti-epidemic measures taken by subvented non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") and service operation of these NGOs

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)629/19-20(01) and CB(2)652/19-20(04) to (05)]

3. At the invitation of the Chairman, Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services) ("DDSW(S)") briefed members on the social welfare support provided by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") during the COVID-19 epidemic, as well as the anti-epidemic measures and service operation of subvented NGOs.

Support provided by the Social Welfare Department for social welfare service units

Special allowances

4. Dr KWOK Ka-ki expressed concern that the numbers of face masks provided by the Administration for residential care homes for the elderly ("RCHEs") and residential care homes for persons with disabilities ("RCHDs") were inadequate to meet the needs of staff and residents of these RCHEs and RCHDs. He further opined that the special allowance for procurement of personal protective equipment and sanitizing items ("special allowance for strengthening preventive measures") provided for RCHEs and RCHDs was also inadequate for them to purchase sufficient face masks.

5. The Deputy Chairman, Dr Fernando CHEUNG and Dr KWOK Ka-ki called on the Administration to ensure that sufficient personal protective equipment and face masks were provided for both the staff and service users of social welfare service units. Mr Holden CHOW was of the view that the Administration should accord priority to residents and frontline staff of RCHEs in the provision of face masks. Mr LEUNG Che-cheung considered that private RCHEs/RCHDs should also be provided with face masks and the special allowance for strengthening preventive measures.

6. DDSW(S) responded that SWD had provided one million face masks for the staff of a total of 1 277 subvented, contract, self-financing and private residential service units (including RCHEs/RCHDs licensed by SWD), so as to facilitate these units to continue their provision of services. He said that around 60% of these face masks were provided for subvented residential service units and the remaining 40% were distributed to other residential service units. The face masks and the special allowance for strengthening preventive measures would help address the needs of RCHEs/RCHDs for face masks. SWD would provide RCHEs/RCHDs with more face masks when there was an increase in the supply of face masks.

Admin

7. At Dr KWOK Ka-ki's request, DDSW(S) undertook to provide information on whether the one million face masks provided by SWD could meet the needs of the 1 277 residential service units for face masks; and if not, how many of these units had a shortfall in face masks and the number of such shortfall.

8. The Chairman remarked that the Administration should also provide face masks for the needy in the community when there was a stable supply of face masks. DDSW(S) responded that the Administration had received donations of face masks and sanitizing items from some groups and individuals. These items had been distributed to the needy and disadvantaged groups in society according to the wishes of the donors.

9. Mr LUK Chung-hung said that according to a survey conducted by Hong Kong Social Workers and Welfare Employees Union in February 2020, around 21.5% of the respondents were not provided with face masks by their employers and around 10% of the respondents were required to take either no pay leave or paid leave during the epidemic. Taking the view that employees should not be required to take paid leave or no pay leave during the epidemic, he enquired whether the Administration was aware of the problem. He also asked whether the Administration would assist social welfare organizations in purchasing face masks so that they

would have sufficient supply of face masks for their frontline staff.

10. DDSW(S) reiterated that the one million face masks provided by SWD were entirely for use by staff of subvented, contract, self-financing and private residential service units, including RCHEs/RCHDs. He further advised that the Administration did not receive formal complaints about the leave arrangements of specific social welfare organizations but had received some letters regarding the issue. The Administration had requested the senders of these letters to provide information on the organizations concerned for the Administration to follow up.

11. Mr POON Siu-ping expressed concern that the special allowance for strengthening preventive measures might not be sufficient for social welfare service units to strengthen epidemic preventive measures. Noting that the Administration would provide the special allowance in two rounds, Mr POON enquired whether the social welfare service units which had received the special allowance in the first round would be provided with the special allowance again in the second round. DDSW(S) responded in the affirmative. DDSW(S) further said that the second round of special allowance had been extended to cover some social welfare service units which had not been provided with the special allowance in the first round.

12. In response to Mr POON Siu-ping's enquiry about the amount of special grant disbursed to each of the 557 child care centres ("CCCs") under the Anti-epidemic Fund, DDSW(S) explained that the amount of special grant provided for a CCC would depend on the number of children enrolled in the CCC concerned as at mid-January 2020. The level of grant was \$4,000 or \$2,000 per enrolment per month, depending on whether the enrolment was in full-day mode or half-day mode, or the approved monthly fee of the CCC concerned, whichever was the less. At the Chairman's request, DDSW(S) undertook to provide the number of CCCs which had applied for the special grant under the Anti-epidemic Fund.

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13. Mr LEUNG Che-cheung enquired about the basis for setting the amount of special allowance for staff of subvented and subsidized residential care homes ("RCHs") ("special allowance for residential service staff") at 10% of their monthly salary. DDSW(S) responded that the special allowance sought to show recognition of and appreciation to the efforts of staff of subvented and subsidized RCHs in maintaining residential care services during the epidemic. The special allowance would be payable from February to May 2020 and the Administration considered the amount of special allowance appropriate. He further said that another special allowance for manpower support was also provided for RCHs and

home-based care service units to cover additional manpower expenses incurred in hiring temporary staff/relief workers or internal deployment of manpower to work overtime to replace their regular staff who were unable to return to work due to their self-isolation or being put under quarantine at home or in other venues as a result of their return to Hong Kong from the Mainland during the period from 27 January to 29 February 2020.

14. The Chairman expressed concern that staff of self-financing RCHs and RCHs which were not under the Lump Sum Grant ("LSG") subvention were not eligible for the special allowance for residential service staff. Given that these staff had also made efforts to maintain residential care services during the epidemic, he called on the Administration to consider providing them with the special allowance.

15. DDSW(S) explained that staff of subvented/subsidized RCHs were entitled to the special allowance for residential service staff regardless of whether or not the RCHs concerned were operating under the LSG subvention system. He further said that self-financing RCHs would be provided with the special allowance for strengthening preventive measures and the special allowance for manpower support.

Other support services

16. Mr LUK Chung-hung enquired about the training provided for frontline staff of social welfare service units on preventing COVID-19 infection. Mr LEUNG Che-cheung asked about the guidelines provided for private RCHs on preventing COVID-19 infection.

17. Assistant Director (Licensing and Regulation) ("AD(LR)") responded that the Centre for Health Protection ("CHP") had issued the "Guidelines for Residential Care Homes for the Elderly or Persons with Disabilities for the Prevention of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)" which were applicable to subvented, self-financing and private RCHEs/RCHDs. The guidelines of CHP included, among others, advice on the management of suspected or confirmed cases in RCHs. Inspectors of SWD's Licensing Office of RCHEs ("LORCHE") and Licensing Office of Residential Care Homes for Persons with Disabilities had been maintaining contact with RCHs and had reminded them to implement infection control and strengthen personal and environmental hygiene measures in accordance with the guidelines of CHP. RCHs were also reminded to follow the visiting arrangement stipulated in the guidelines of CHP.

18. AD(LR) added that for NGOs and subsidized service units to grasp the development of the epidemic and the latest information and guidelines related to infection control, SWD had forwarded to them a total of 10 letters from CHP since January 2020, and reminded them to refer to the guidelines of CHP to take timely and appropriate preventive measures. SWD had all along worked collaboratively with the Department of Health to conduct infection control training programmes and workshops for staff of RCHs.

19. Given that provision of many welfare services had been suspended during the epidemic, Mr LUK Chung-hung suggested that the Administration should provide resources for social welfare service units to set up visual communication system to facilitate them to maintain some of their services. DDSW(S) concurred that video communication would enable social welfare service units to maintain their contact with service users to a certain extent. He said that the Administration would consider Mr LUK's suggestion having regard to the service provision during the epidemic.

Support for the unemployed and the under-employed

20. The Deputy Chairman said that the Chief Executive ("CE") announced on 14 February 2020 that a one-off special allowance would be provided for each beneficiary household under the Working Family Allowance ("WFA") regardless of whether they were unemployed or under-employed. In his view, the unemployed or the under-employed could not benefit from the one-off special allowance unless the Administration relaxed the eligibility criteria for WFA.

21. Mr CHAN Chi-chuen remarked that many low-income families who were eligible for WFA did not apply for WFA for reasons such as complicated application procedures or difficulties in obtaining proof of working hours from their employers. As such, these families could not receive the one-off special allowance for unemployed/under-employed recipients of WFA. He called on the Administration to relax the working hour requirements and simplify the application procedures for WFA so as to benefit more needy families.

22. DDSW(S) responded that as WFA-related issues were under the ambit of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency ("WFSFAA"), he would relay members' views to WFSFAA.

Support for elderly persons and persons with disabilities

23. Noting that some service units might provide services for persons with special needs during the epidemic, Mr POON Siu-ping sought the number of persons who had received such services. Mr Holden CHOW enquired about the measures adopted by the Administration to ensure that services for the elderly, such as district elderly community centre ("DECC") service and meal delivery service, would not be affected during the epidemic.

24. DDSW(S) responded that although some service centres were not open to the public during the epidemic, these centres were still manned by staff to answer telephone enquiries and contact service users by phone. The caseloads of Home Care Service for Persons with Severe Disabilities and Integrated Support Service for Persons with Severe Physical Disabilities in February 2020 were around 2 500 and around 860 respectively, and around 10% to 15% of the service users had visited day care centres for the elderly ("DEs") during the epidemic. He further said that to meet the needs of elderly persons for meal services, DECCs and neighbourhood elderly centres had prepared meal boxes for elderly persons to take home.

25. In response to Dr Fernando CHEUNG's call for the resumption of bathing service for elderly persons, DDSW(S) said that bathing and shopping services were provided for elderly persons on a need basis. SWD would remind service providers that such services should be provided if necessary. Mr CHU Hoi-dick opined that bathing service for elderly persons and persons with disabilities should be fully resumed. DDSW(S) responded that the Administration would discuss with service providers the timing for service resumption having regard to the development of the epidemic and the service needs.

26. Dr Fernando CHEUNG pointed out that as no visits were allowed to RCHs during the epidemic, the Administration should keep family members of RCH residents abreast of the residents' conditions so as to ease their worries. DDSW(S) explained that some RCH operators had made use of telephone and video communication to facilitate residents and their family members to maintain contact. SWD would remind RCH operators to enhance their communications with family members of residents.

Support for children with special needs

27. The Chairman and the Deputy Chairman pointed out that with school

bus services suspended during the epidemic, some pre-school children with special needs, who had difficulties in taking public transport, could not go to training centres. The Deputy Chairman further said that some parents of pre-school children with special needs had reflected to him that with training service suspended, their children had regressed in their abilities in the physical, social, cognitive, speech, emotional and behavioral aspects. The Chairman and the Deputy Chairman called on the Administration to assist these children in commuting to training centres during the epidemic. Dr KWOK Ka-ki enquired about the assistance provided for these children who were affected by service suspension during the epidemic.

28. DDSW(S) responded that noting the impact concerned on the rehabilitation progress of pre-school children with special needs, the Administration had discussed with relevant service operators how the support for these children and their parents during the epidemic could be continued.

29. DDSW(S) further explained that to strike a balance between protection of the health of staff of service operators as well as service users and maintenance of training services, SWD had, on 28 February 2020, requested service operators to resume training for pre-school children with special needs on a one-on-one basis in a progressive manner subject to parents' consent. Service providers would also provide home-based video training and e-training for these children and give advice to parents over the phone on how the training for their children could be provided at home. As regards transportation arrangement for these children, DDSW(S) said that SWD would handle requests for shuttle services from the parents concerned on a case-by-case basis.

30. Expressing concern that many parents of pre-school children with special needs were under great pressure due to the suspension of services during the epidemic, Dr Fernando CHEUNG called on service providers to enhance their communication with these parents by phone or via electronic means. He further suggested that the Administration should better prepare special child care centres ("SCCCs") for service resumption by providing sufficient personal protective equipment for their staff, arranging transportation for service users and drawing up operational guidelines for SCCC. The Administration should also make sure that all SCCC would follow the operational guidelines and relevant guidelines issued by CHP. The Deputy Chairman urged the Administration to provide face masks for pre-school children with special needs and their parents who wished to attend training classes at SCCC during the epidemic.

31. DDSW(S) responded that the number of service users brought back to individual SCCCs ranged from zero to two during the epidemic. To strike a balance between meeting service needs and protecting the health of their staff and service users, SCCCs should take into account their stock of personal protective equipment when deciding the scale of service resumption. He further said that SCCCs which had resources constraints in resuming services could contact SWD for assistance.

32. Referring to the submission from Talk Foundation Ltd. (LC Paper No. CB(2)675/19-20(01)), Mr CHU Hoi-dick said that many parents had expressed grave concern that the suspension of SCCC services had affected adversely the rehabilitation progress of their pre-school children with special needs. These parents had requested the Administration to provide make-up classes and arrange for their pre-school children with special needs to receive training programmes at SCCCs for another year. In this connection, he enquired whether the Administration would allocate the necessary resources to service providers for arranging make-up classes and reserving places for SCCC service users to receive the same training programmes.

33. Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that the Administration should also consider deferring the assessments conducted by the Child Assessment Centres which would take place in end-March 2020. This arrangement would allow more time for pre-school children with special needs who were affected by the suspension of training services to catch up with the required training.

34. DDSW(S) responded that as there were 1 300 waitlistees for SCCC places, reserving places for SCCC service users to receive the same training programmes would affect the waiting time of SCCC waitlistees. The Administration had discussed with service providers arranging make-up classes for pre-school children with special needs and some service providers had responded positively. The Administration would further discuss the arrangements with service providers.

35. The Chairman asked whether the Administration would consider the suggestions of Talk Foundation Ltd. regarding the provision of one-off special allowance for SCCC service users to purchase rehabilitation services from private organizations and allocation of funds for service providers to cope with the additional workload after the resumption of their services. DDSW(S) responded that the Administration would need to study the suggestions.

Support for social enterprises and self-financing social welfare organizations

36. Dr CHENG Chung-tai referred to a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Social Workers General Union in which it was reported that the liquidity of around 40% of social enterprises ("SEs") could only last for three months and 20% of SEs had no income in the past two months. He expressed concern that a large number of SEs might close down if the epidemic continued. Taking the view that the Administration should not exclude SEs from the subsidy schemes under the Anti-epidemic Fund, he called on the Administration to provide financial assistance for SEs and their employees through other government funds, for example, by waiving the rent of SEs which operated on government premises or providing special allowance for employees of SEs. He further urged the Administration to provide assistance for service users, such as elderly persons, persons with disabilities and children with special needs, who were affected by the disruption of services of SEs.

37. DDSW(S) responded that the Administration had provided special assistance for some 30 SEs funded by SWD's Enhancing Employment of People with Disabilities through Small Enterprise Project ("the Project") in the light of the epidemic. These SEs were also eligible for various anti-epidemic special allowances provided by the Administration. SEs not operating under the Project were outside the purview of the Labour and Welfare Bureau or SWD.

38. Dr Fernando CHEUNG remarked that many self-financing social welfare organizations also had financial difficulties due to the epidemic. As many of their services were similar to those provided by organizations subsidized or subvented by SWD, he took the view that it would have an adverse impact on the provision of welfare services to the community if these organizations could not continue their operations. As such, the Administration should consider allocating resources to these organizations so as to assist them in tiding over financial difficulties during the epidemic. The Chairman urged the Administration to identify and assist organizations which were subvented/subsidized by SWD but had not been covered by the Administration's social welfare support and anti-epidemic measures.

39. DDSW(S) responded that the Administration had on 7 March 2020 informed self-financing organizations operating DEs under the Pilot Scheme of Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly that the Administration would provide them with a special allowance. The Administration would keep in view the situation and implement new

measures to assist service providers as necessary.

Implementing quarantine arrangement in residential care homes for the elderly

40. Prof Joseph LEE said that according to the Chairman of the Elderly Commission ("EC"), new quarantine centres should be built to accommodate residents of RCHEs who were subject to quarantine. The EC Chairman had suggested that before such new centres were to be built, the Administration might consider putting the RCHE residents concerned under quarantine in the RCHEs they were residing. Prof LEE further said that some nurses of RCHEs took the view that the EC Chairman's suggestion was not feasible as the existing RCHEs were not equipped with the facilities such as negative pressure rooms or isolation rooms for quarantine. He expressed concern that the suggestion, if adopted, would put RCHE staff and residents who were not subject to quarantine at risk. In this connection, he enquired how the Administration would help RCHEs implement the quarantine arrangement.

41. AD(LR) responded that RCHEs had to comply with the requirements stipulated in the Code of Practice for RCHEs, including the implementation of effective infection control measures and provision of isolation facilities. RCHEs were required to report suspected cases, if any, to LORCHE and CHP immediately. CHP would conduct risk assessment on the RCHEs concerned, and define close contacts and other contacts of confirmed cases. CHP would give professional advice on how to handle the staff and residents identified as close contacts and other contacts. CHP would also assess if the environment of the RCHEs concerned was suitable for quarantine.

Processing applications for social security

42. Noting that the unemployment rate had increased as a result of the epidemic, Mr POON Siu-ping was concerned that SWD's special work arrangement might affect the employment support services for unemployed recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA"). Mr Holden CHOW said that some applicants for CSSA or social security allowances ("SSA") might not be able to meet the application deadlines or had failed to satisfy the residence requirement or the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong owing to the epidemic. He called on the Administration to consider these applications favourably on a discretionary basis.

43. The Deputy Chairman said that according to some staff of SWD's Social Security Field Units ("SSFUs"), CSSA applications might not be approved within six weeks due to SWD's special work arrangement. As a result, some CSSA applicants had to rely on SWD's food assistance. He took the view that the processing of CSSA applications should not be affected by SWD's special work arrangement.

44. Assistant Director (Social Security) ("AD(Social Security)") responded that to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19 infection in the community and to ensure timely delivery of services, SSFUs had put in place a series of streamlined measures in handling CSSA and SSA applications since late January 2020. These measures included accepting new applications by post or through collection boxes of SSFUs, waiving or suspending home visits, etc. SSFUs would contact the applicants by phone, by post or via electronic means, if necessary. Face-to-face interviews with applicants, if so required, would also be arranged on an individual basis. AD(Social Security) stressed that although SSFUs were not open to the public during the critical epidemic period from 10 February 2020 to 6 March 2020, operation was maintained and all CSSA applications received in January 2020 were processed on schedule in February 2020. She further explained that CSSA payments would be disbursed to eligible cases within seven working days upon receiving all the required information for processing the applications.

45. AD(Social Security) added that taking into consideration the recent epidemic development and service demand, SSFUs had been re-open to the public starting from 9 March 2020. However, the streamlined measures were still in effect and members of the public were advised not to go to SSFUs as far as possible. For those who needed to visit SSFUs, prior appointment was strongly recommended to minimize groups gathering.

46. In response to Mr POON Siu-ping's enquiry about the number of new CSSA unemployment cases received since the implementation of SWD's special work arrangement, AD(Social Security) said that the Administration had yet to compile the statistics for February 2020. In response to the Deputy Chairman's request for the number of CSSA applicants who had submitted all the required information but had not received CSSA payments within six weeks after their submissions, AD(Social Security) undertook to explore if there was available information related to CSSA applications received within the month of February 2020.

(At 12:38 pm, the Chairman extended the meeting for five minutes beyond the appointed ending time to allow sufficient time for discussion.)

Delivering prescription medications to Guangdong and Fujian Provinces

47. Noting that the Administration had introduced a special scheme by commissioning the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions ("FTU") to use its offices and service network in the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces to deliver prescription medications to Hong Kong residents with urgent need for such medications in the two Provinces while the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation ("Regulation") was in force, Mr CHAN Chi-chuen enquired about the number of cases handled by FTU and whether the special scheme would continue until the expiry of the Regulation. He further asked whether the Administration had considered engaging NGOs or the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Guangdong as well to implement the special scheme, given that FTU was a political party.

48. DDSW(S) responded that the special scheme was implemented under the collaboration of various government departments and SWD was responsible for the verification of the prescription drugs. After verification, the prescription drugs would be couriered, at the cost of the Government, to the Mainland offices of FTU for its onward couriering to the persons concerned. Given that FTU had an established service network in the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces, it would be able to deliver medications to the persons concerned in a timely manner. He further said that FTU had handled 1 201 cases between 14 February and 5 March 2020.

49. Mr LEUNG Che-cheung enquired whether the Administration would extend the special scheme to other provinces on the Mainland. DDSW(S) responded that as there was a larger number of Hong Kong people in the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces than in other provinces on the Mainland, the special scheme was first implemented in these two provinces. In response to Mr LEUNG's suggestion of establishing a mechanism for delivering prescription medications to Hong Kong residents with urgent need for such medications in provinces other than the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces, DDSW(S) said that the Administration would study the suggestion and consider arranging drug delivery service on a case-by-case basis for Hong Kong people residing outside the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces, if practicable.

IV. Any other business

50. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 12:46 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
14 May 2020