

**For discussion on
9 March 2020**

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

**Social Welfare Support, and Anti-epidemic Measures and
Service Operation of Subvented Non-governmental Organisations
during the Epidemic**

Purpose

This paper sets out the social welfare support provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) epidemic, as well as the anti-epidemic measures and service operation of subvented non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Background

2. The Government announced on 25 January 2020 that the response level under the “Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance” would be raised to Emergency Response Level. Special work arrangement for government departments has been implemented after the Lunar New Year holidays (starting from 29 January) in order to reduce the risk of COVID-19 being spread in the community. The Government also appealed to private sector organisations to make similar arrangements as far as practicable. In response to the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Government has announced that it would implement targeted measures to reduce social contact and infection control measures, and the gradual resumption of more public services from 2 March in an orderly manner.

Social Welfare Support during the Epidemic

Social welfare services

3. While minimising the risk of COVID-19 being spread in the community, the Government is concerned about the needs of children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities in the community. The arrangements for various subsidised welfare services from 2 March 2020 are as follows –

- (a) All aided child care centres (CCCs), day care centres for the elderly, sheltered workshops, integrated vocational rehabilitation services centres, integrated vocational training centres and day activity centres will suspend their service delivery. These centres will, however, remain open depending on the situation to serve those in special need. Individual service users who have the need for these services may contact the centres or service units concerned in advance.
- (b) Apart from (i) and (x) which are provided as normal, the other services will be provided on a limited scale and with groups and programmes suspended –
 - (i) all residential care services;
 - (ii) Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) (only providing casework service);
 - (iii) Integrated Services Centres (only providing casework service);
 - (iv) short-term food assistance service;
 - (v) Integrated Home Care Services (only providing meal, escort, nursing and administration of medicine services);
 - (vi) Enhanced Home and Community Care Services (only providing meal, escort, nursing and administration of medicine services);
 - (vii) Home Care Service for Persons with Severe Disabilities (only providing escort, nursing and administration of medicine services);
 - (viii) Integrated Support Service for Persons with Severe Physical Disabilities (only providing escort, nursing and administration of medicine services);
 - (ix) Visiting Medical Practitioner Service for Residential Care Homes;
 - (x) hotline services; and
 - (xi) humanitarian assistance for non-refoulement claimants.

Areas within the above service units designated for public use, such as resource corners and game corners, will be temporarily closed.

- (c) Centre-based services subsidised by SWD, such as district elderly community centres, neighbourhood elderly centres, social and recreational centres for persons with disabilities, integrated children and youth services centres, children and

youth centres and community centres, will not be open to the public to reduce the risk of infection arising from the gathering of people. These centres will, however, provide services on a limited scale (such as meal service provided by elderly centres and standardised care need assessment for elderly services).

- (d) For other services not covered by (a) to (c) above, subvented NGOs operating them may decide whether to continue to provide them under their respective Funding and Service Agreements (FSAs) having regard to their circumstances.

These arrangements will continue until further notice, except for aided CCCs which will basically suspend their service delivery as stated above up to and including 19 April as class resumption in schools will be no earlier than 20 April.

4. Separately, the Government and different sectors in the community are striving to increase the supply of personal protective equipment through procurement from all sources and to expand the local production of these items. Recently, the Government has received donations of face masks and sanitising items from some groups and individuals. The Government has been distributing these items to needy bodies and disadvantaged groups in the society according to the wishes of donors.

Social security

5. SWD has been ensuring timely payments to recipients of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme and the Social Security Allowance (SSA) Scheme (including Old Age Allowance, Old Age Living Allowance and Disability Allowance), and has been closely monitoring the situation. It also provides appropriate assistance for recipients with urgent and special needs. Separately, the Financial Secretary announced in August 2019 a series of measures to support enterprises, safeguard jobs and relieve people's burden, which include providing a one-off extra allowance for recipients of the CSSA Scheme and the SSA Scheme equivalent to one month's payment. The relevant allowance has been progressively disbursed starting from 7 January 2020. The Financial Secretary also proposed at the 2020-21 Budget on 26 February to provide another round of one-off extra allowance for the aforementioned recipients equivalent to one month of the relevant payments.¹

¹ The Chief Executive announced on 14 January 2020 to provide a time-limited special allowance to the unemployed/under-employed who have received the Working Family Allowance (WFA) and

6. Meanwhile, to minimise the risk of the spreading of COVID-19 in the community, SWD has made special arrangements on CSSA cases requiring payment extension. A three-month payment extension is arranged for all CSSA cases with payment expiry date falling between 29 January and 31 March 2020. Recipients are not required to approach the Social Security Field Units for the extension arrangement. They will receive notification letters from SWD after extension of their cases. SWD will keep in view the development of the epidemic and make appropriate arrangements. Besides, SWD announced on 14 February that the Director of Social Welfare would give consideration to disregard absences from Hong Kong of applicants/recipients of the CSSA Scheme and the SSA Scheme (including Old Age Allowance, Old Age Living Allowance and Disability Allowance) who fail to satisfy the residence requirement or the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong owing to the epidemic. SWD has appealed to them that there is no need to rush back to Hong Kong. In the light of the epidemic development, applicants for the Guangdong Scheme and the Fujian Scheme may submit their applications by post, instead of doing so in person in Hong Kong.

Service Operation Arrangements of Subvented NGOs

7. All subvented NGOs were notified of the arrangements of SWD-subsidised welfare services on 28 January, 1 February, 7 February and 13 February 2020 respectively. The latest notice on the arrangements starting from 2 March (details are set out in paragraph 3 above) was issued on 28 February. Subvented NGOs may operate their services based on the relevant principles, and arrange for their staff to either work at office or at home in accordance with their human resource policies. Besides, SWD issued a letter to NGOs on 11 February, informing them that the impact of the epidemic on their service delivery will be taken into full consideration during future assessment of whether the performance of their service units meets the service requirements stipulated in the FSAs and flexibility will be exercised.

Student Financial Assistance (SFA). Having considered the adverse impact of COVID-19 epidemic on the economy and the need for expeditious assistance for these low-income families, the Chief Executive announced on 14 February to relax the relevant arrangements by providing a one-off special allowance for around 200 000 low-income families under the Anti-epidemic Fund. This relaxed arrangement is to provide a one-off special allowance for each beneficiary household under WFA and means-tested SFA for pre-primary, primary and secondary students regardless of whether they are unemployed or under-employed. The Anti-epidemic Fund has obtained funding from the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council on 21 February. The Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency will start disbursing the special allowance by end-June 2020. Beneficiary households are not required to make applications.

8. Separately on 28 January 2020, SWD informed the subvented NGOs commissioned to operate the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance of the service arrangements after the end of the Lunar New Year holidays (i.e. from 29 January to 31 March), including service registration and delivery by phone, cancellation of service registration interviews and job plan interviews, and postponement of training courses/activities.

9. The aforementioned measures have struck a balance between maintenance of urgent and essential social welfare services and protection of staff health. SWD will continue to make timely announcement of updated welfare service arrangements in the light of the latest development of the epidemic.

Anti-epidemic Measures in Subvented NGOs and Other Measures

Guidelines on epidemic control

10. For NGOs and subsidised service units to grasp the development of the COVID-19 epidemic and the latest information and guidelines related to infection control as soon as practicable, SWD has forwarded a total of 10 letters from the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) since January 2020, and reminded them to refer to the guidelines of CHP to take timely and appropriate preventive measures.

11. Besides, day child care services (including CCCs, Mutual Help Child Care Centres and the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project) are required to take preventive measures against infectious diseases and report to CHP on infected cases in accordance with the “Guidelines on Prevention of Communicable Diseases in Schools/Kindergartens/Kindergartens-cum-Child Care Centres/Child Care Centres” issued by CHP.

12. Regarding residential care services, residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs) and residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) must comply with the various requirements stipulated in the Code of Practice for RCHEs and the Code of Practice for RCHDs, including the implementation of effective infection control measures and provision of isolation facilities. SWD has recently reminded residential care homes again to continue stepping up various infection control and personal and environmental hygiene measures and observing relevant instructions to handle residents or staff returning from the Mainland and

suspected or confirmed cases in the homes in accordance with the “Guidelines for Residential Care Homes for the Elderly or Persons with Disabilities for the Prevention of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)” issued by CHP.

13. Meanwhile, regarding IFSCs, SWD notified subvented NGOs on 28 January 2020 that apart from the suspension of groups and programmes, areas within IFSCs designated for public use (including resource corners or game corners) would also be closed. Face-to-face interviews should be avoided unless it is necessary, and communication with service users may be conducted by phone or other electronic means to avoid cross-transmission. IFSCs have also asked visitors to use masks and clean their hands with alcohol-based handrub, and are scheduling different time slots for interviewing service users.

Special allowance to strengthen preventive measures

14. In order to assist welfare service units to strengthen their epidemic prevention measures, SWD issued letters to related NGOs and service operators on 23 January and 10 February 2020 to provide relevant service units under subventions or contracts, as well as all RCHEs and RCHDs with two rounds of special allowance (at a rate of \$5,000 or \$3,000 each round) for the procurement of personal protective equipment and sanitising items. The first round of allowance covers over 2 800 service units, involving an expenditure of around \$13.8 million. The second round of allowance covers about 3 000 beneficiary service units (including five self-financing shelters/hostels for street sleepers and recognised service providers of the Community Care Service Voucher), involving an expenditure of around \$14.6 million. Furthermore, SWD will provide a special allowance in March for about 290 CCCs attached to kindergartens that were not included in the two rounds of special allowance, involving an expenditure of around \$2.9 million.

15. To subsidise foster parents in the light of the additional expenses incurred on the procurement of face masks and other sanitising items for their foster children during the epidemic period, SWD will provide an additional living allowance of \$300 per month for each foster child from February to May 2020 (a total of 4 months).

Provision of face masks for residential service units

16. The Government will provide 1 million face masks for the staff of subvented, contract, self-financing and private residential service units

(including RCHEs and RCHDs licensed by SWD) so as to assist them to continue to provide services. The first batch of 500 000 face masks was distributed by SWD during the period from 19 to 21 February 2020, benefiting a total of 1 277 residential service units. The second batch of 500 000 face masks is expected to be distributed in early March.

Special allowance for manpower support for residential care homes and home-based care service units

17. In view that some residential care homes and home care service teams have their regular staff being put under quarantine arrangements and thus face manpower shortage, SWD issued a letter to relevant operators on 11 February 2020 to the effect that SWD-subsidised residential care homes and home-based care service units as well as the RCHEs, RCHDs, Drug Dependent Persons Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres licensed under SWD and the residential CCCs registered under SWD may receive a one-off special allowance for manpower support. In the event of their staff being unable to return to work due to their going into self-isolation, staying at home or being put under quarantine arrangements at home or other venues as a result of their return to Hong Kong from the Mainland during the period from 27 January to 29 February, the allowance ensures that relevant homes/units/centres may make additional manpower arrangements (including hiring of temporary staff/relief workers or internal deployment of manpower to work overtime, etc.) and maintain daily operations. The special allowance covers additional manpower expenses incurred arising from staff being absent during the period from 27 January to 13 March for the aforementioned reasons.

Special allowance for residential service staff

18. Staff of subvented and subsidised residential care homes have stayed committed to work during the epidemic, providing comprehensive residential care service for the frail elderly, persons with disabilities, as well as children and youth in need of residential care service, while assisting residential care homes in ramping up preventive measures and stepping up cleansing and sterilisation of the premises. SWD issued a letter to subvented NGOs on 26 February 2020 on a special allowance for the staff of subvented and subsidised residential care homes to show recognition of and appreciation to their efforts in maintaining residential care services. The special allowance amounts to 10% of the monthly salary of an employee with a cap at \$4,000 for no less than 4 months (i.e. the period from February to May, and the expenses incurred in April and May shall be disbursed following the passage of the Appropriation Bill

2020), involving an expenditure of around \$208 million. The special allowance is expected to benefit 745 subvented and subsidised residential care homes with around 20 000 employees.

Special allowance for child care centres

19. In the light of the epidemic, this special allowance aims to help 557 aided and non-aided CCCs tide over the financial difficulties arising from the prolonged suspension of service. Under the newly established Anti-epidemic Fund, SWD will provide a special allowance for CCCs for no less than 4 months, involving an expenditure of up to \$55 million per month or \$220 million in total. SWD strives to disburse the first round of the special allowance to CCCs in March 2020.

Delivering urgent medications to Guangdong and Fujian Provinces

20. Upon the implementation of the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation on 8 February 2020, many Hong Kong people residing in the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces are unable to come to Hong Kong as planned to attend follow-up consultations to replenish their medications. To help address the problem faced by these Hong Kong people, the Government introduced a special scheme on 24 February 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 in the two Provinces while the Regulation is in force. For Hong Kong residents who have appointment record for follow-up consultations with the Hospital Authority and DH, the FTU will help them to collect prescription medications. After verification, the prescription drugs will be couriered, at the cost of the Government, to the Mainland offices of FTU for its onward couriating to the persons concerned. The service recipients concerned are not required to pay any service fees. The scheme will first process cases in which prescription drugs will run out on or before 31 March.

21. SWD is grateful to the welfare sector and colleagues for holding the fort during the epidemic, and is also grateful to many other organisations for undertaking proactive initiatives to fill the service gaps. Together with NGOs and stakeholders, SWD will continue its best efforts to provide support by different means.

Advice Sought

22. Members are invited to note SWD's support during the epidemic, as well as the anti-epidemic measures and service operation of subvented NGOs.

**Labour and Welfare Bureau
Social Welfare Department
March 2020**