

Fourth-term Commission on Poverty convenes first meeting

The Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, chaired the first meeting of the fourth-term Commission on Poverty (CoP) today (September 21). The meeting mainly discussed the extension of six Community Care Fund (CCF) programmes and the support to families in need, students and schools amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

Members endorsed the extension of four CCF programmes which are carers-related, with details as follows:

(i) The CoP agreed to extend the Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Carers of Elderly Persons from Low-income Families for 36 months until end-September 2023. Under the pilot scheme, a monthly allowance of \$2,400 is disbursed to each eligible carer of elderly persons from low-income families to help supplement their living expenses, so that elderly persons with long-term care needs may receive more proper care. (The amount of allowance would increase to \$4,800 per month if the carer would take care of more than one elderly person at the same time.) The CoP also agreed to the enhancement measures, including the provision of an additional 2 000 places. The extension and the enhancement measures of the pilot scheme involve an additional funding of around \$344.71 million, and the total budget for the pilot scheme is revised to \$882.95 million.

(ii) The CoP agreed to extend the Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities for 36 months until end-September 2023. Under the pilot scheme, a monthly allowance of \$2,400 is disbursed to each eligible low-income carer of persons with disabilities so that persons with disabilities with long-term care needs may receive more proper care. (The amount of allowance would increase to \$4,800 per month if the carer would take care of more than one person with disabilities at the same time.) The CoP also agreed to the enhancement measures, including the provision of an additional 1 000 places. The extension and enhancement measures of the pilot scheme involve an additional funding of around \$274.4 million, and the total budget for the pilot scheme is revised to \$498.62 million.

(iii) The CoP agreed to extend the Pilot Scheme on Providing Subsidy for Higher Disability Allowance (HDA) Recipients in Paid Employment to Hire Carers for 36 months until end-September 2023 under the current mode of operation. Under the pilot scheme, a monthly subsidy of \$5,000 is provided to persons with disabilities, who are eligible for HDA and engaged in paid employment, to hire carers to assist them in travelling between their homes and workplaces, with a view to encouraging them to stay in employment. No additional funding is required for the extension of the pilot scheme.

(iv) The CoP agreed to extend the Special Care Subsidy for the Severely Disabled programme for 35 months until end-September 2023 under the current

mode of operation. The existing three levels of subsidy determined according to household income providing a full grant of \$2,000 per month, a three-quarters grant of \$1,500 per month and a half grant of \$1,000 per month remain unchanged. The extension of the programme involves an additional funding of around \$167.33 million, and the total budget for the programme is revised to \$620.12 million.

Mr Cheung said, "The objective of the extension of four carers-related programmes to end-September 2023 is to enable the Government to study carers' needs more comprehensively before the completion of the study on carer policy. The extension of the four programmes involves a total additional funding of \$786.44 million, fully demonstrating the Government's care for the underprivileged."

Members also endorsed the extension of two other CCF programmes, with details as follows:

(i) The CoP agreed to extend the Pilot Scheme on Home Care and Support for Elderly Persons with Mild Impairment for 25 months until December 2022. The pilot scheme provides home care and support services to low-income elderly persons assessed with mild impairment and waitlisted for Integrated Home Care Services (Ordinary Cases) with a view to facilitating their ageing in place. The CoP also agreed to enhancement measures, including an increase in the ceiling for the service quantity of meal services per month from 50 to 62 and an increase in the ceiling for the service hours of home services per month from 12 hours to 15 hours. No additional funding is required for the extension of the pilot scheme.

(ii) The CoP agreed to extend the Pilot Scheme on Raising the Maximum Level of Disregarded Earnings for Recipients with Disabilities under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme for four months until January 2021 under the current mode of operation so as to tie in with the relevant regularisation arrangement and the extension of coverage to all eligible Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients. Under the pilot scheme, the maximum level of disregarded earnings for recipients with disabilities is raised such that the first \$1,200 of the monthly earnings from employment of a disabled CSSA recipient will be totally disregarded, while up to half of the next \$5,600 of earnings (i.e. \$2,800) will also be disregarded. This adds up to a total disregarded earnings of \$4,000 per month (i.e. an "additional disregarded earnings" of \$1,500 per month) to encourage recipients to secure employment. The extension of the pilot scheme involves an additional funding of around \$2.52 million, and the total budget is revised to \$56.58 million.

At the meeting, the Labour and Welfare Bureau and the Education Bureau (EDB) briefed members on the welfare, employment and learning support provided to families and students in need amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

On welfare support, measures included the provision of a time-limited unemployment support scheme through the CSSA system, with a view to providing timely and basic assistance to the unemployed during this difficult time.

Meanwhile, to support low-income non-CSSA households under the deteriorating economic and employment conditions as a result of the epidemic, the Government has commenced payment of the one-off special allowance under the Anti-epidemic Fund to eligible Working Family Allowance households and Student Financial Assistance households since June 2020. As at end-August 2020, the Working Family Allowance Office under the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency (WFSFAA) has disbursed about \$880 million to more than 180 000 low-income households.

On employment support, the Labour Department (LD) raised the ceiling of on-the-job training allowance payable to employers under the Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged, the Youth Employment and Training Programme, and the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme in September 2020, with a view to further encouraging employers to hire the elderly and middle-aged, young people, and persons with disabilities. Upon enhancement, employers engaging job seekers under these three employment programmes would be paid an allowance of up to \$60,000 per employee. The LD also launched a pilot scheme in September to encourage eligible employees to undergo and complete on-the-job training under the above employment programmes through the provision of a retention allowance. Subject to the length of the on-the-job training period, a full-time employee may receive a retention allowance of up to \$12,000.

On learning support, the CCF has implemented an assistance programme since the 2018/19 school year to subsidise needy students studying in schools that implement the "Bring Your Own Device" policy to purchase mobile computer devices to facilitate e-learning. The EDB encouraged schools to participate in the assistance programme, and would exercise flexibility in processing applications by accepting applications submitted by all public sector primary and secondary schools implementing e-learning for their eligible students before full resumption of classes. To support financially needy students, a subsidy for Internet access charges has been disbursed to eligible families through the Student Finance Office of WFSFAA and the Social Welfare Department.

Mr Cheung said, "The Government has all along attached importance to the learning needs of students, and will continue to implement various measures to support the e-learning of students from grass-root families."

CoP members discussed the relevant support measures and gave suggestions on how further support could be rendered to those in need.