

SLW's speaking notes on welfare and women policy areas tabled at LegCo Finance Committee special meeting

Following are the speaking notes of the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, on welfare and women policy areas tabled at the special meeting of the Legislative Council (LegCo) Finance Committee today (April 9):

Chairman and Honourable Members,

In 2020-21, government recurrent spending on social welfare and women's interests is estimated to be \$93.9 billion, accounting for 19.3 per cent of the total recurrent government expenditure for the year, second only to education. Compared with the revised estimate for 2019-20 of \$82.3 billion, there is an increase of about \$11.6 billion (i.e. 14.2 per cent). This reflects the Government's commitment to supporting the disadvantaged. The Government will continue to provide and enhance our support for the disadvantaged, including the elderly, children, persons with disabilities, low-income families and those in need. Now, let me highlight how the Labour and Welfare Bureau will make use of these resources.

Elderly care

The recurrent government expenditure on elderly services in 2020-21 is estimated to reach about \$12.3 billion, representing an increase of about 17 per cent over the revised estimate in 2019-20. In 2020-21, the Government will provide an additional 1 797 subsidised residential care places, including 181 places provided by contract homes and subsidised homes and 1 616 EA1 places under the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme, as well as 320 subsidised day care places for the elderly. The Government has also allocated additional resources to implement various initiatives on enhancing elderly services put forth in the Chief Executive's 2019 Policy Address, including providing a total of 3 000 additional service quotas under the Integrated Home Care Services (Frail Cases) in 2020 and 2021, and providing an additional 1 000 service vouchers, bringing the total to 8 000, under the Pilot Scheme on Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly. In addition, the Government will allocate additional resources to relevant subsidised elderly service units (including subsidised elderly homes and elderly community care and support service units) to provide soft meals for elderly persons with swallowing problems. The Government will also make arrangements under the Pilot Scheme on Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly and the Pilot Scheme on Residential Care Service Voucher for the Elderly accordingly so that service units can provide soft meals to elderly persons in need.

Social welfare service units

To make available a more comfortable environment for service users to take part in activities, starting from 2020-21 onwards, the Government will provide an additional recurrent provision of \$46.6 million to the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) subvented by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and operating day service units to meet the electricity costs of providing air conditioning for all activity areas. This initiative will benefit 1 147 subvented day service units and more than 1 million service users.

Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP)

To enhance the service quality of the NSCCP, the SWD has allocated an additional provision of about \$24 million to service operators since January this year, enabling them to increase manpower to strengthen training for home-based child carers, and raised the level of incentive payment for home-based child carers to encourage more volunteers to serve as child carers.

Launching Pilot Scheme on Social Work Services for Pre-primary Institutions

For early identification of and provision of assistance to pre-primary children and their families with welfare needs, the Government has allocated \$990 million from the Lotteries Fund to provide social work services in phases in subsidised/aided child care centres, kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child care centres for about 150 000 pre-primary children and their families. The first two phases have provided services to 485 eligible pre-primary institutions in total. The third phase will commence in August this year.

Short-term food assistance service

Given the prevailing local economic conditions, the Government will allocate a further \$85 million to the short-term food assistance service for meeting the projected growth in demand for food assistance. The Government expects that the proposed allocation will sustain the service till July 2021, with at least 20 000 beneficiaries.

Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF)

The Government will inject \$500 million into the CIIF to support social capital development projects (including community support projects for residents of new public rental housing estates) and build mutual help networks in the community through cross-sectoral collaboration. The funding injection should enable the continual operation of the CIIF until 2024, for supporting about 140 projects benefiting more than 140 000 people.

Strengthening After School Care Programme

In order to meet the keen service needs, the Government will introduce various enhancement measures to strengthen the After School Care Programme at primary school level, including addition of 2 500 full fee-waiving places, relaxation of application eligibility, increase of the subsidy level, provision of extra subsidy for students with special educational needs, and streamlining of the financial vetting process. The enhancement measures are expected to roll out in October 2020 and benefit more than 5 700 students and their families.

Ethnic Minority (EM) District Ambassador pilot scheme

In view of the increasingly diversified needs of EM communities, the Government will launch a three-year EM District Ambassador pilot scheme in 2020-21 in nine districts with higher EM populations. Additional EM or designated staff will be engaged as EM District Ambassadors to enhance service provision in welfare service units of the SWD and subvented NGOs.

Rehabilitation services

Supporting pre-school children with special needs

To provide early support to pre-school children with special needs, the Government will keep in view the demand and supply of pre-school rehabilitation services and the manpower supply of allied health professionals concerned, and provide additional places under various pre-school rehabilitation services in a timely manner. The Government has plans to increase the number of on-site pre-school rehabilitation services places by 1 000 each year for the three school years from 2020/21 to 2022/23. This total increase of 3 000 service places will bring the overall number of service places to 10 000, involving an additional full-year provision of \$306 million. The total number of service places of special child care centres as well as early education and training centres will also increase gradually by about 1 200 to about 6 700 from 2019-20 to 2021-22, involving an additional full-year provision of \$150 million.

Enhancing community support and residential services

The Government will continue to increase the number of day rehabilitation service and residential service places. In 2019-20 to 2021-22, about 3 800 additional service places are expected to be gradually provided through planned development projects, involving an additional full-year provision of \$628 million. In 2020-21, 345 additional residential places will be purchased under the Bought Place Scheme for Private Residential Care Homes for Persons with Disabilities, and 130 additional day rehabilitation service places will be provided through purchase of premises, involving an additional full-year provision of \$61 million.

Training sponsorship

The Government will continue to implement the Training Sponsorship

Scheme to sponsor NGOs providing subsidised elderly or rehabilitation services in offering tuition fee sponsorship to occupational therapy (OT) and physiotherapy (PT) students whom the NGOs have recruited. The Scheme covers the OT/PT Master Programmes of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from 2020-21 to 2023-24 as well as the OT Bachelor Programme of Tung Wah College from 2020-21 to 2022-23.

Cash assistance

As regards cash assistance, the Chief Executive's 2019 Policy Address announced a series of improvement measures under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme, which include substantially increasing the rent allowance, and relaxing the eligibility of a range of supplement and special grants. It is expected that an additional annual expenditure of \$960 million will be incurred. Meanwhile, in order to maintain the relativity between the payments under the Working Family Allowance (WFA) and CSSA, the Government will increase all payment rates under the WFA, which will incur an additional annual expenditure of \$460 million. The Government has issued a paper to the LegCo Finance Committee with respect to the above improvement measures, and will implement them as soon as practicable after their approval.

Furthermore, the Chief Executive announced on January 14, 2020, to standardise the payment rates of the Old Age Living Allowance (OALA) by adopting the Higher OALA rate, and significantly increase the asset limits to \$500,000 for elderly singletons and \$750,000 for elderly couples. These enhancements are estimated to benefit about 150 000 elderly persons, which will involve an additional annual expenditure of about \$3.7 billion. The implementation timetable and relevant details will be announced in due course.

The Chief Executive also announced on February 14, 2020, to provide a one-off special allowance under the newly established Anti-epidemic Fund to each beneficiary household under the WFA and means-tested Student Financial Assistance for pre-primary, primary and secondary students. The Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency will start disbursing the special allowance in batches by end-June, which will benefit more than 200 000 low-income households and involve a one-off expenditure of \$990 million.

Separately, the Financial Secretary has proposed in the 2020-21 Budget to provide an extra allowance to recipients of social security and the Work Incentive Transport Subsidy, which is equal to one month of payment. It is expected to benefit over 1.4 million persons and will involve an additional one-off expenditure of about \$4.2 billion.

The various measures I have just mentioned involve an additional recurrent expenditure of more than \$5 billion per year, as well as another \$5 billion one-off expenditure.

Women's development

In 2020-21, the Government has earmarked around \$38 million to promote women's interests and support the work of the Women's Commission (WoC). These include the provision for assisting the WoC in implementing the Capacity Building Mileage Programme and implementing the Funding Scheme for Women's Development under which 18 District Councils and women's groups may implement programmes that are conducive to women's development.

Chairman, this concludes my opening remarks. Members are welcome to raise questions.