

SLW's speaking notes on welfare, poverty alleviation and children policy areas tabled at LegCo Finance Committee special meeting

Following are the speaking notes of the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, on welfare, poverty alleviation and children policy areas tabled at the special meeting of the Legislative Council Finance Committee today (April 17):

Chairman and Honourable Members,

In 2023-24, government recurrent spending on social welfare is estimated to be \$121 billion, accounting for 21.6 per cent of the total recurrent government expenditure of the year, first amongst all policy groups. Compared with the revised estimate for 2022-23 of \$106 billion, there is an increase of about \$15 billion (14.1 per cent) in recurrent spending on social welfare. This reflects the Government's commitment to continuously supporting the disadvantaged. Now, let me highlight how the Labour and Welfare Bureau will make use of these resources.

Elderly services

The recurrent government expenditure on elderly services this year is estimated to reach about \$15 billion, representing an increase of about 74 per cent over about \$8.6 billion compared to five years ago (i.e. 2018-19).

The Government will continue to implement various initiatives to strengthen residential care services, including provision of some additional 2 200 subsidised residential care places for the elderly this year, regularising the Residential Care Service Voucher Scheme for the Elderly and providing additional resources to EA2 homes of the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme to upgrade to meet the EA1 standards. To alleviate the shortage of nurses in the welfare sector, the Government will subsidise an additional 1 700 or more students to enrol in Enrolled Nurse (EN) (General) training in the next five years. Subsidised students are required to work as EN (General) in welfare services organisations recognised by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) after graduation for a continuous period of no less than three years.

With regard to community care and support services, the Government will provide 188 subsidised day care service places for the elderly this year and regularise the Community Care Service Voucher Scheme for the Elderly, which will increase by phases the number of beneficiaries from 8 000 at present to 12 000 in 2025-26. In addition, the Government will set up 16 new Neighbourhood Elderly Centres in the next five years and expand the service scope of a total of over 200 District Elderly Community Centres and Neighbourhood Elderly Centres this year to cover retirement planning and

promotion of gerontechnology. To support more discharged elderly patients to recover at home, the Government will expand the Integrated Discharge Support Programme for Elderly Patients by increasing the number of beneficiaries from about 33 000 to 45 000 per annum and the number of beneficiaries who can be referred to receive home support services from about 9 000 to 11 000.

The Government will enhance the Incentive Scheme to Encourage Provision of Residential Care Home for the Elderly (RCHE) Premises in New Private Developments by raising the gross floor area (GFA) of these private RCHEs that can be benefited and further exempting such GFA from the calculation of the maximum GFA of the relevant projects. We are drawing up the details with the Development Bureau, with a view to launching the enhanced measures in the second quarter of this year, which are to be reviewed after a three-year trial period.

Cash assistance

The Government continues to support needy individuals and households through various cash assistance schemes and has been taking forward related enhancement measures. We merged the Normal and Higher Old Age Living Allowances with effect from September last year and will relax the absence limit under the pre-application one-year continuous residence requirement of the Social Security Allowance Scheme in the third quarter of this year.

This year's Budget proposed to provide an extra half-month allowance to eligible recipients of social security payments, which will involve an expenditure of about \$2,721 million and is expected to benefit about 1.63 million persons. Similar arrangements will apply to recipients of the Working Family Allowance. It is expected that some 70 000 households would benefit from this initiative, involving an expenditure of about \$116 million. We expect that the extra allowance would be disbursed a month after the passage of the Appropriation Bill 2023 by the Legislative Council (LegCo) at the earliest.

Overall, the estimated recurrent expenditure on cash assistance in this year amounts to about \$75.4 billion, which is about 40 per cent higher than that five years ago.

Enhance pre-school rehabilitation services

The SWD, with funding support from the Lotteries Fund, launched from August 2020 the Pilot Project on Tier 1 Support Services in pre-primary institutions to provide early intervention services for children awaiting assessment by Child Assessment Centres or assessed to have borderline developmental problems, and provide support for their parents and teachers. Since the Pilot Project enjoyed tremendous success, the Government will regularise the Tier 1 Support Services with effect from September 2023. The coverage of the Tier 1 Support Services will also be expanded from around 80 pre-primary institutions at present to nearly 900 and such services will be integrated with On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services, so as to offer comprehensive and timely assistance to pre-school children with different levels of special needs through inter-disciplinary service teams under a

school-based and integrated approach. This measure will incur an annual expenditure of about \$170 million.

Enhance support for carers

Carers devote much time and energy to supporting elderly persons and persons with disabilities so that they can continue to live in the community. In recognition of their contributions, the Government will step up its efforts to cater for carers' various needs. On financial support, the Government will regularise the Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Carers of Elderly Persons from Low-income Families and the Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities and the amount of monthly allowance will increase from \$2,400 to \$3,000 starting from October 2023, involving an annual expenditure of about \$430 million. The Government will also set up a 24-hour dedicated carer support hotline in the third quarter of 2023, with professional social workers rendering emergency support, emotional counselling and outreaching services.

Targeted poverty alleviation

For tackling the poverty problem, the current-term Government adopts the strategy of targeted poverty alleviation by directing resources to those most in need. The Strive and Rise Programme is the first targeted poverty alleviation initiative to help underprivileged junior secondary school students (particularly those living in subdivided units) through tripartite collaboration among the Government, the business sector and the community. The SWD has earmarked \$72.6 million this year to implement and promote the Programme, including establishing an "alumni club" for mentees who have completed the first round of the Programme to sustain and expand the social network between mentees and mentors as well as implementing the second round of the Programme. The Government has also appointed the new-term Commission on Poverty to study and identify any other target groups for poverty alleviation, and provide views and suggestions to the Government, so that targeted poverty alleviation initiatives and policies can be formulated to cater for the needs of different underprivileged groups in order to achieve the effects of alleviating poverty or helping them rise above poverty. We will report the progress to the Subcommittee on Reforming the Poverty Alleviation Policies and Strategies of the LegCo later.

Child protection

The Government is taking forward at full steam the setting up of a mandatory reporting mechanism for child abuse cases, with the target of introducing a bill into the LegCo in the first half of this year. The measures in the pipeline to dovetail with the new legislation include enhancing the Government's enforcement and support capacity; providing appropriate training to practitioners in the relevant professions; and strengthening the promotion and public education work on child protection. To this end, an additional full-year provision by the Government is about \$24.2 million.

To better care for children lacking of parental care and those with

emergency care needs, the SWD has completed the review of the residential child care and related services. The SWD has commenced follow-up of the improvement recommendations for the first phase of the review, which covered residential child care centres and residential special child care centres for children aged below 6, with an additional full-year provision of about \$80 million for improving the manning ratio of child care workers, increasing frontline support staff and introducing professional support, increasing the service places of residential child care services and stepping up inspection and enforcement efforts. The SWD has completed the second phase of the review last month, which covered children institutions for other age groups and foster care services, etc, and will proactively follow up the improvement recommendations.

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