

LCQ10: Enhancement of the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System

Following is a question by the Hon Tang Ka-piu and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 8):

Question:

There are views that the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System (LSGSS) implemented since 2001, while boosting the motivation and creativity of social service organisations, has at the same time given rise to various problems, and needs to be comprehensively reviewed and improved in a timely manner. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the assessment criteria for the District Services and Community Care Teams include (i) being patriotic and loving Hong Kong and being able to support and follow the Government's leadership, (ii) having a certain level of district network and service experience, (iii) possessing cross-district mobilisation capability, and (iv) being able to consolidate and seek community resources, whether the Government will consider adopting the same assessment criteria for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) receiving lump sum grant subvention (particularly those receiving recurrent subvention); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that in reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council on the Estimates of Expenditure 2023-2024, the Government indicated that 127 of the Funding and Service Agreements (FSAs) signed between the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and NGOs are non-time-defined, whether the Government will review the relevant mechanism (including formulating guidelines and performance indicators) to enhance the autonomy of such organisations, and convert such non-time-defined FSAs into time-defined ones; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) as there are views pointing out that currently some NGOs are unable to seize the opportunity of the system reform by redeploying their resources so as to keep abreast of the times (e.g. increasing support for young people), whether the authorities will formulate long-term plans and relevant guidelines to help such organisations redeploy their resources; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) as the Government indicated in reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council on July 5 this year that the funding and sponsorship programmes under Government bureaux and departments would require the recipient organisations to properly acknowledge the source of government funding through relevant funding conditions, whether the SWD has currently formulated relevant guidelines to require compliance by organisations receiving funding under the LSGSS; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Social Welfare Department (SWD), by adopting a "services-based" approach, provides subvention to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating welfare services for serving those in need. To cater for the ever-changing service demands of the society, the Government reviews publicly-funded services and projects from time to time, and provides different types of subsidy to NGOs. This facilitates NGOs to not only enhance and improve existing services, but also to develop innovative modes of welfare service provision, with a view to meeting the latest social development needs of the community and keeping abreast of the times. The SWD implemented the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System (LSGSS) to allocate subventions to NGOs to operate welfare services as stipulated in the Funding and Service Agreements (FSAs). The LSGSS seeks to focus on the effectiveness of service delivery and replace the previous subvention mode where allocations were approved on an item-by-item basis, with a view to allowing NGOs greater flexibility and higher efficiency in utilising subventions and providing appropriate welfare services.

My reply to the Hon Tang's question is as follows:

(1) The SWD requires all NGOs operating subvented welfare services to take all necessary measures to safeguard national security and comply with the Hong Kong National Security Law when operating and providing services. If NGOs engage in acts or activities that are likely to cause or constitute the occurrence of offences endangering national security or which would otherwise be contrary to the interest of national security, the SWD may immediately terminate the FSAs signed with them. When appointing NGOs to operate welfare services, the SWD will, depending on factors such as the service nature and the specific needs of service users, take into account the NGOs' relevant service experience as one of the assessment criteria. The applicants shall also specify in their proposals how they plan to implement the services specified by the SWD and effectively carry out related work through their district networks.

(2) At present, there are time-defined or non-time-defined FSAs. Prior to the implementation of the LSGSS, the SWD signed non-time-defined FSAs with NGOs based on the previous subvention system. To ensure that subvented services align with the Government's policy objectives, the SWD will specify the objectives, nature, content and target groups of the services in the FSAs, and all subvented service units must comply with the relevant requirements and standards prescribed by the SWD, including essential service requirements, output/outcome standards and the service quality standards. The SWD will conduct reviews for different services as necessary, and convert non-time-defined FSAs into time-defined FSAs following the reviews, so as to meet the ever-changing service needs and relevant requirements.

(3) The Government published the Review Report on Enhancement of Lump Sum Grant Subvention System in July 2021 and put forward a number of recommendations of enhancement of the LSGSS, including conducting systematic

service reviews to keep pace with the changing needs of users of various types of welfare services, improving utilisation of reserves, human resource management, financial planning, and enhancing accountability and corporate governance of NGOs. Among all, the scope of service reviews included reviewing the service targets, service nature and notional staffing establishment, etc., so as to timely respond to the service needs of users. The SWD, in accordance with the relevant recommendations, is gradually reviewing different services, including residential child care services, sheltered workshops and integrated vocational rehabilitation services centres, integrated home care services (ordinary cases), district elderly community centres/neighbourhood elderly centres, etc.

(4) To fully demonstrate the Government's commitment to welfare services and facilitate the public in identifying subvented welfare services, the SWD will require all subvented welfare service units to clearly indicate on their premises and promotional materials that the relevant welfare services are subvented by the SWD. The SWD will inform the sector of the detailed arrangements in due course.

[LCQ11: Measures to support persons with hearing impairment](#)

Following is a question by the Hon Gary Zhang and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 8):

Question:

Some concern groups have relayed that in its "Special Topics Report No. 63 – Persons with disabilities and chronic diseases" published in 2021, the Census and Statistics Department adopted a definition for "persons with hearing difficulty" (the updated definition) that is different from the one adopted in its previous surveys (the original definition). According to the updated definition, there were about 47 900 persons with hearing difficulty in 2020, while the number would be over 240 000 under the original definition. Such a change in definition would have an impact on the Government's policy towards persons with hearing impairment (HI) and might lead to reduced supporting resources for persons with HI. Regarding the measures to support persons with HI, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will consider reverting to the original definition in compiling statistics on persons with HI;

(2) as it has been learnt that the grant currently provided by the Social Welfare Department for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance recipients with binaural hearing loss is only enough for purchasing a monaural hearing

aid with the most basic features, but quite a number of recipients have relayed that the given hearing aids are useless, whether the authorities will consider providing such recipients with binaural hearing aid fitting and upgrading the quality of the hearing aids, as well as reviewing the existing service mode;

(3) whether it has compiled statistics on the current total number of sign language interpreters in Hong Kong; what specific policy is in place to ensure the service quality of sign language interpreters;

(4) whether it has compiled statistics on the current number of counselling experts or psychologists who are able to provide services in sign language for persons with HI; in respect of improving the mental health of persons with HI, whether the authorities will formulate guidelines for counselling experts or psychologists on the provision of mental health services for persons with HI; and

(5) of the existing channels through which students with HI may apply to the Education Bureau for the provision of sign language interpretation service in class; of the amount of funding set aside by the University Grants Committee for application by hearing impaired students with special educational needs in each of the past five years, and the number of students benefited annually?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), the Health Bureau and the Education Bureau (EDB) on the Member's question, I set out below a consolidated reply:

(1) The C&SD has updated the definitions for selected types of disability (including hearing difficulty) when conducting the survey on persons with disabilities and chronic diseases from August 2019 to December 2020 in relation to the latest international development in collecting statistical data on disability. This update was based on the recommended question sets developed by the United Nations Washington Group on Disability Statistics, which are based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, and have been widely adopted internationally. Before adopting the updated definition in this round of the survey, the C&SD had consulted stakeholders including relevant Government bureaux/departments (B/Ds), statutory bodies, the academia and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The responses were generally supportive.

In spite of the update in the statistical definition, in order to cater for the needs of different statistical data users on disability statistics, the C&SD continued to collect information on persons with disabilities under the original definition and released the survey results in "Special Topics Report No. 63". Data users can apply different sets of data depending on the situation. The C&SD plans to continue to collect and disseminate information on persons with disabilities under both definitions in future. Relevant B/Ds

may take into account the survey results in the "Special Topics Report No. 63" as well as other factors such as the current service demand from persons with disabilities in their service planning.

(2) The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for people who cannot support themselves financially due to old age, ill-health, disability, single parenthood, unemployment, low-earnings or for other reasons to help them meet their basic needs. CSSA recipients with hearing impairment (HI) receive higher standard rates than able-bodied CSSA recipients, and are provided with a number of supplements and special grants to cater for their special needs.

In particular, CSSA recipients with HI may apply for a special grant from the Social Welfare Department (SWD) to cover the cost of hearing aids on an actual cost basis, subject to recommendations from recognised health professionals of the Hospital Authority (HA), Department of Health, the SWD or NGOs subvented by the SWD. The SWD will process such applications based on the assessment and recommendations of recognised health professionals. There are no restrictions on the types of the hearing aids.

(3) The Government does not maintain statistics on the number of sign language interpreters in Hong Kong. As regards the service quality of sign language interpreters, the Labour and Welfare Bureau in September 2015 included sign language in the domain of language courses under the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) and accepted applications from course providers for registration of their sign language courses as the CEF courses. In addition, the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee and the Hong Kong Joint Council for People with Disabilities/Hong Kong Council of Social Service have established the List of Sign Language Interpreters in Hong Kong for voluntary registration since June 2016, which sets out the information of sign language interpreters (including professional qualifications, work experience and contact means) to facilitate organisations and the public to choose sign language interpretation services. It is expected that the setting up of the List can help promote the learning and use of sign language, and will also be conducive to fostering the development of sign language interpretation as a profession in the long run.

(4) The Government does not maintain statistics on the number of counselling professionals or psychologists who are able to provide services in sign language for persons with HI. The HA currently does not have guidelines for counselling professionals or psychologists on the provision of mental health services to persons with HI. Nevertheless, the multi-disciplinary psychiatric teams of the HA, comprising doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, occupational therapists, medical social workers, etc, have all along been providing holistic healthcare services for patients with mental health needs (including those with HI). Healthcare professionals will provide appropriate in-patient, out-patient, day rehabilitation training and community support services for patients according to their clinical condition and needs. In the course of medical treatment or consultation, the hospital or clinic concerned will arrange interpretation service (including sign language) to facilitate communication if required by patients or healthcare professionals.

(5) For primary and secondary schools, the Government adopts a dual-track mode in the implementation of special education. The EDB will, subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and with parents' consent, refer students with more severe HI or those students with HI who cannot construct knowledge because of inadequate speech abilities (i.e. those students who may need to use sign language in communication and learning) to the School for Children with Hearing Impairment to receive intensive support services. Other students with HI will attend ordinary schools for integrated education.

With the support of the EDB, the School has all along been implementing various projects of Sign-assisted Instruction, including the Development of New Vocabulary of Sign Language for New Senior Secondary Curriculum Programme and the Removing Communication Barriers in Sign Language and Oral Language Holistic Support for Students with Hearing Impairment Programme, to continuously integrate and develop new sign vocabularies needed in teaching for teachers. The School has also compiled a visual sign language dictionary that contains daily and subject-based sign vocabularies for public use. In addition, the School has set up a Sign Language Teaching Resources Centre to provide consultation services for students, parents and teachers in need.

As regards public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools, the EDB has all along been providing additional resources to support students with special educational needs (SEN), including students with HI. If schools consider it more appropriate to adopt sign language or combine the use of sign language to assist students in learning, schools may deploy the additional resources, such as the Learning Support Grant, holistically and flexibly to employ teachers or teaching assistants who know sign language, or hire professional services including sign interpretation service to cater for the needs of the students with HI.

For the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities, they may, under the principle of institutional autonomy, flexibly deploy their recurrent subventions allocated in the form of a block grant by the Government for various purposes, including the allocation of resources to support students with HI. In addition, the UGC allocates additional resources to the eight UGC-funded universities in the 2022-2025 triennium by providing an additional special funding of \$67.5 million for the Special Grant to Enhance the Support for Students with Special Educational Needs, which seeks to enable the universities to enhance the teaching and learning experience of students with SEN, strengthen staff training and promote campus integration. All students with HI are among the beneficiary groups. Based on the data provided by the universities, the numbers of students with HI enrolled in the UGC-funded programmes in the past five years (2018/19 to 2022/23 academic years) are 98, 104, 89, 98 and 98 respectively.

LCQ9: Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Wendy Hong and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 8):

Question:

Regarding the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the annual number of able-bodied CSSA recipients and their average time of stay on CSSA since 2021, and set out in the table below a breakdown by (i) economically active person (i.e. (a) employed persons and (b) unemployed persons) and (ii) economically inactive person (i.e. (c) homemakers, (d) students, (e) retirees and (f) unpaid carers);

Able-bodied CSSA recipients		2021	2022	2023 to date
(i)	(a)			
	(b)			
(ii)	(c)			
	(d)			
	(e)			
	(f)			
Total				
Average time of stay on CSSA				

(2) of the annual number of cases of participation in the Support for Self-reliance Scheme since 2021; among such cases, the number of cases in which the participants successfully secured employment, as well as the number of cases in which the participants withdrew from the CSSA Scheme upon employment and the average time taken to do so;

(3) given that there are views that the current absence of a time limit for CSSA entitlement of able-bodied recipients under the CSSA Scheme is unable to motivate such recipients to actively secure employment and leave the CSSA net, whether the authorities will consider setting a time limit for CSSA entitlement of able-bodied recipients (for example, setting a cap at six months, and if such recipients still need to apply for CSSA after the relevant time limit, they must submit an application afresh and undergo the income and asset tests, or switch to apply for the Working Family Allowance), so as to motivate such recipients to actively join the labour market; and

(4) given that there are views that as the income and asset tests are currently conducted on a household basis under the CSSA Scheme, the amount of

assistance received will be affected if individual family members join the labour market or have an increase in income, thus leading to objection by other family members to their employment, whether the authorities will consider disregarding the earnings of family members other than the CSSA applicants and their spouses when conducting the income and asset tests, so as to avoid affecting the CSSA applicants' continued entitlement to CSSA, and suitably raising the asset limits to allow CSSA recipient families to accumulate a certain amount of savings through work, thereby providing an incentive to encourage members of such families to join the labour market, and helping them become self-reliant and leave the CSSA net as early as possible?

Reply:

President,

The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for people who cannot support themselves financially due to old age, ill-health, disability, single parenthood, unemployment, low-earnings or for other reasons to help them meet their basic needs.

The CSSA Scheme not only provides cash assistance to needy persons, but also assists recipients who may work to overcome employment barriers to achieve self-reliance. In January 2013, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) launched the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance (IEAPS), under which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide services to relevant recipients to encourage and assist them to enhance employability and secure paid employment. In April 2020, the SWD launched the enhanced Employment Support Services (EmSS) to improve the NGOs' efficacy in providing the relevant services.

In general, unemployed able-bodied CSSA recipients aged 15 to 59 are required to receive the EmSS, unless they have justifiable reasons for not being able to work (such as pursuing studies, or having to look after young children, sick or disabled family members at home). They are required to undertake compliance with the relevant obligations (such as applying for a certain number of jobs within a specified period of time) in writing. In case of incompliance, they and their family members will become ineligible for CSSA and must repay overpaid CSSA. Able-bodied CSSA recipients aged 60 to 64 may receive the EmSS on a voluntary basis.

My reply to the four parts of the question raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) and (2) The numbers of unemployed or low-earning able-bodied CSSA recipients aged 15 to 64 from 2021-22 to 2023-24 are set out in Table 1 at Annex, while the median durations of CSSA unemployed or low-earning cases receiving CSSA are set out in Table 2 at Annex.

From January 2013 to September 2023, about 138 000 recipients had participated in the IEAPS and/or received the EmSS cumulatively, while about

27 600 recipients successfully secured employment or returned to mainstream education, including about 7 690 recipients leaving the CSSA net.

The SWD does not have other information sought in these two parts of the question.

(3) and (4) As explained above, the CSSA Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for people who cannot support themselves financially. In this connection, rigorous means tests (including income and asset tests) are put in place to ensure that finite public resources are used to cater for needy people. The asset limits are adjusted annually according to the established mechanism on the basis of the movement of the Consumer Price Index (A).

Upholding the concept of mutual support amongst cohabiting family members, CSSA recipients should first make use of economic resources of their family members to meet their basic needs. In this connection, the SWD considers an applicant's eligibility for CSSA on a household basis. In special cases such as an applicant having poor relationship with his/her cohabiting family members, the SWD will prudently consider exercising discretion and allow the applicant with special circumstances to apply for CSSA independently. The SWD will also refer the case to appropriate social service units for assistance.

Apart from the EmSS, the Disregarded Earnings (DE) arrangement under the CSSA Scheme provides additional financial incentives to encourage CSSA recipients to seek jobs and stay employed. The amount of assistance payable to CSSA applicants or recipients is the difference between their or their family's recognised needs and assessable income under the CSSA Scheme. When assessing the monthly household income, earnings from employment can be disregarded up to a prescribed level to raise the recipients' incentive to work. In February 2021, the Government significantly increased the maximum level of DE by 60 per cent to \$4,000. Specifically, the monthly earnings that may be totally disregarded have been raised from the first \$800 to the first \$1,200, while up to half of the next \$5,600 of earnings (i.e. \$2,800) may be disregarded. The maximum total amount of DE is \$4,000 per month. In addition, from February 2021, the Government has increased the totally disregardable earnings from a recipient's new jobs from the first month's earnings to the first two months' earnings, on condition that the recipient has not benefitted from such DE in the past two years.

To verify recipients' continued eligibility for CSSA, the SWD conducts regular reviews, spot checks and investigations (upon receipt of reports) on approved cases, including conducting income and asset tests. Nonetheless, considering that the CSSA Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for those who cannot support themselves financially, and that the predicaments faced by recipients and their causes differ, setting a uniform time limit for receiving CSSA may lead to practical difficulties in recipients' lives.

Labour Department to hold seminar on Employment Ordinance

The Labour Department has called for registration for a seminar on the Employment Ordinance to be held at 2.15pm on December 6 (Wednesday) at Mei Foo Community Hall, 1/F, Mei Foo Government Complex, 33 Mei Lai Road, Mei Foo, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon.

The main provisions of the Employment Ordinance and abolition of the Mandatory Provident Fund offsetting arrangement will be introduced.

The seminar will be conducted in Cantonese and participation is free of charge. Interested participants should complete the registration form, which can be downloaded from the Labour Department's website (www.labour.gov.hk), and return it by email by November 22 (Wednesday). The quota will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. For enquiries, please call 3575 8671.

SFST to attend Annual Conference of Financial Street Forum 2023 in Beijing

The Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Christopher Hui, will depart for Beijing this evening (November 8) to attend a parallel forum on the Belt and Road Initiative at the Annual Conference of the Financial Street Forum 2023.

The parallel forum will be held on November 9, with the theme of promoting Belt and Road development to foster regional co-operation and achieve mutual benefits. Mr Hui will deliver a speech at the forum.

The Financial Street Forum was founded in 2012. The Annual Conference of the Financial Street Forum has been enhanced as a national, global and professional forum since 2020. More than 400 participants from over 30 countries and regions worldwide are invited to attend this year's annual conference to exchange views on current economic and financial hot topics.

Mr Hui will return to Hong Kong on November 10. During his absence, the Under Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Joseph Chan, will act as the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury.