

立法會

Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)778/20-21

(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of meeting

**held on Monday, 23 November 2020, at 10:45 am
in Conference Room 1 of the Legislative Council Complex**

Members present : Dr Hon CHIANG Lai-wan, SBS, JP (Chairman)
Hon YIU Si-wing, BBS (Deputy Chairman)
Hon WONG Ting-kwong, GBS, JP
Hon CHAN Hak-kan, BBS, JP
Hon Michael TIEN Puk-sun, BBS, JP
Hon Steven HO Chun-yin, BBS
Hon CHAN Han-pan, BBS, JP
Hon LEUNG Che-cheung, SBS, MH, JP
Hon Alice MAK Mei-kuen, BBS, JP
Hon KWOK Wai-keung, JP
Hon Elizabeth QUAT, BBS, JP
Hon POON Siu-ping, BBS, MH
Hon Holden CHOW Ho-ding
Hon Wilson OR Chong-shing, MH
Hon YUNG Hoi-yan, JP
Dr Hon Pierre CHAN
Hon CHAN Chun-ying, JP
Hon LUK Chung-hung, JP
Hon LAU Kwok-fan, MH
Hon Kenneth LAU Ip-keung, BBS, MH, JP
Dr Hon CHENG Chung-tai
Hon Vincent CHENG Wing-shun, MH, JP

Members absent : Hon Starry LEE Wai-king, SBS, JP
Hon Christopher CHEUNG Wah-fung, SBS, JP
Hon Martin LIAO Cheung-kong, GBS, JP
Hon CHEUNG Kwok-kwan, JP

Public Officers attending : Items III and IV

Mr HO Kai-ming, JP
Under Secretary for Labour and Welfare
Labour and Welfare Bureau

Item III

Ms Michelle LAM Wai-yip
Assistant Director (Social Security)
Social Welfare Department

Mr Andrew KWAN Kai-ming
Senior Statistician (Social Welfare)
Social Welfare Department

Item IV

Ms Linda LAW Lai-tan
Principal Assistant Secretary for Labour and Welfare
(Welfare) 3
Labour and Welfare Bureau

Prof Alice CHONG Ming-lin
Senior Researcher (2)
Labour and Welfare Bureau

Prof Hector TSANG Wing-hong
Chair Professor and Head of Department of
Rehabilitation Sciences
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Clerk in attendance : Miss Lilian MOK
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Ms Catherina YU
Senior Council Secretary (2) 4

Mr Roger CHUNG
Council Secretary (2) 4

Miss Alison HUI
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

Action

I. Information paper(s) issued since the last meeting
[LC Paper No. CB(2)316/20-21(01)]

Members noted that a letter dated 12 November 2020 from Ms Elizabeth QUAT proposing items for discussion by the Panel in the 2020-2021 session had been issued since the last meeting.

II. Items for discussion at the next meeting
[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)337/20-21(01) and (02)]

List of outstanding items for discussion

2. Noting that there were a number of proposed items pending discussion as shown in the List of outstanding items for discussion ("the List"), the Deputy Chairman requested the Administration to work with the Secretariat to re-categorize the items based on their key contents to facilitate members' discussion and make effective use of the meeting time. He also suggested that the Administration might provide information papers for some of the items for members to consider whether there was a need to continue to follow up on the matters concerned at a meeting. Referring to item 41 entitled "Charitable fund-raising activities" on the List, the Deputy Chairman noted with concern the rising number of online crowd-funding activities for various purposes in recent years.

3. The Chairman remarked that the Panel would, as in the past, spare no effort in following up on the proposed items on the List in the 2020-2021 session. As far as she understood, the Administration and the Secretariat had been reviewing the List and would make recommendations on the categorization of the proposed items for her consideration. If members had any proposed items for discussion by the Panel, they could inform the Secretariat in writing.

Policy briefing-cum-meeting on 14 December 2020

4. Members noted that the next regular meeting would be held on 14 December 2020 at 10:45 am to receive briefing by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare ("SLW") and the Secretary for Home Affairs ("SHA") on the Chief Executive ("CE")'s 2020 Policy Address.

(Post-meeting note: Members were informed vide LC Paper No. CB(2)515/20-21 issued on 11 December 2020 that in view of the severe outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 ("COVID-19") in Hong Kong, the Chairman directed that the above policy briefing-cum-meeting be rescheduled to a later date. Subsequently, members were notified vide LC Paper No. CB(2)553/20-21 issued on 22 December 2020 that as per the Chairman's direction, an informal meeting would be conducted via Zoom videoconferencing on 30 December 2020 for the Panel to receive briefing by SLW and SHA on CE's 2020 Policy Address.)

III. Annual adjustment of social security payment rates under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme and the Social Security Allowance Scheme, and issues relating to rent allowance under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme
[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)337/20-21(03) and (04)]

5. At the invitation of the Chairman, Under Secretary for Labour and Welfare ("USLW") briefed members on:

- (a) the latest position of the Social Security Assistance Index of Prices ("SSAIP"), which registered a cumulative increase of 2.8% as compared to the average figure of October 2019, and the estimated corresponding adjustment to the standard payment rates under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") Scheme and the rates of allowances under the Social Security Allowance ("SSA") Scheme starting from 1 February 2021 subject to the approval of the Finance Committee ("FC");
- (b) the latest position of the Consumer Price Index (A) rent index for private housing ("rent index") and the estimated corresponding adjustment to the maximum rates of the rent allowance ("MRA") under the CSSA Scheme starting from

1 February 2021 if approved by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury ("SFST"); and

- (c) the improvement measures for the CSSA Scheme in the CE's 2019 Policy Address, including the implementation of a significant increase in MRA on 1 July 2020 with the highest rate reaching 27%, raising the maximum level of the monthly disregarded earnings substantially, strengthening the employment support services, extending a range of supplement and special grants to eligible non-elderly able-bodied recipients, etc.

Strengthening support for the unemployed

6. With the local unemployment rate continuing to rise since the outbreak of COVID-19, many members including the Deputy Chairman, Ms Alice MAK, Mr KWOK Wai-keung, Ms Elizabeth QUAT, Mr POON Siu-ping, Mr Holden CHOW, Mr Wilson OR, Ms YUNG Hoi-yan, Mr LUK Chung-hung and Mr Vincent CHENG expressed grave concern that when the Employment Support Scheme ("ESS") ended in November 2020, the waves of closures of enterprises would continue and the unemployment and underemployment rates would rise further. Ms YUNG expressed dissatisfaction with the Administration's failure to formulate a cohesive and comprehensive plan of policies to assist the unemployed during this difficult time.

7. USLW assured members that the Labour and Welfare Bureau ("LWB") was committed to serve those in need and provide various social welfare services for them. Having considered the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19 in Hong Kong, the Administration had launched the "Special Scheme of Assistance to the Unemployed" ("the Special Scheme") under the CSSA Scheme on 1 June 2020 for a period of six months to temporarily relax the asset limits for able-bodied persons by 100% to give targeted support for the unemployed and their families facing immediate economic difficulties. In September 2020, the Administration announced a further extension of the Special Scheme for six months until 31 May 2021. The Administration had been closely monitoring the unemployment situation and would provide timely assistance to persons in need.

8. Owing to the public's negative perception towards CSSA recipients, Mr Holden CHOW, Ms Elizabeth QUAT, Mr Wilson OR and Mr Vincent CHENG suggested looking into other effective means, say, establishing an unemployment assistance fund or further relaxing the asset limits for

applying for CSSA, to help the unemployed persons. Ms Alice MAK, Mr KWOK Wai-keung and Mr LUK Chung-hung also suggested disregarding the cash value of insurance policies in the calculation of the total value of capital assets under the CSSA Scheme and allowing applications for CSSA on individual basis. USLW advised that the Administration should be prudent in considering the establishment of an unemployment assistance fund as it would possibly bring about impact on the existing retirement protection regime. To relieve the imminent needs of the unemployed persons, expedient measures had already been taken through the CSSA Scheme.

9. To relieve people's hardship amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, Ms Elizabeth QUAT suggested that the Administration should consider allowing employees to withdraw the accrued benefits of their contributions in their Mandatory Provident Fund ("MPF") accounts to meet short-term financial needs. Mr KWOK Wai-keung called on the Administration to proactively enhance its communication with members of the public by arranging government officials to go to various districts from time to time to gauge public sentiment, which in turn deepened their understanding about the community needs. He further suggested that the Administration should provide surgical masks to CSSA and SSA recipients through the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") to relieve their financial burden arising from purchasing anti-epidemic items.

10. Noting that all employers participating in the MPF Schemes were eligible to apply for subsidies under ESS, the Deputy Chairman and Ms Elizabeth QUAT shared a similar view that ESS should provide more targeted support to the industries and trades hard hit by COVID-19. USLW advised that established under the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office, the 6-month ESS aimed to provide time-limited financial support to employers to retain employees who might otherwise be made redundant. Long-term strategies to support industries and sectors hard hit by COVID-19 and the way forward for post-pandemic economic recovery would be set out in the 2021-2022 Budget.

Application for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance

11. Mr Vincent CHENG noted from the CSSA caseload statistics that due to the COVID-2019 epidemic, the number of unemployment cases registered a significant increase from around 14 000 cases in March to over 18 000 cases in April while the number of cases stood at around 19 000 in October 2020, representing a stabilizing trend. The unemployment rates, however, had been rising continuously over the same period. Expressing

concern that the number of CSSA applications appeared to lag behind the increase in the unemployment rates, he enquired about the number of CSSA applications rejected or withdrawn under the "unemployment" category and the respective reasons for the rejection and withdrawal since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. Ms Elizabeth QUAT, Mr POON Siu-ping and Ms YUNG Hoi-yan shared a similar view with Mr CHENG.

Admin 12. Assistant Director (Social Security) ("AD(Social Security)") responded that the rate of unsuccessful/withdrawal of CSSA applications remained steady in the past few months. However, the CSSA applicants/recipients were not requested to provide their respective reasons for withdrawing their applications or leaving the CSSA Scheme. Nevertheless, AD(Social Security) undertook to further explore if SWD maintained the requested statistics after the meeting.

(Post-meeting note: The Administration's response was issued to members vide LC Paper No. CB(2)567/20-21(01) on 29 December 2020.)

Admin 13. Mr POON Siu-ping considered that the current annual adjustment mechanism for the CSSA payments failed to keep up with the rapid social changes and provide adequate support for unemployed persons. He enquired about the increase in the number of CSSA applications under the "unemployment" category after the temporary relaxation of the asset limits for able-bodied persons under the Special Scheme and the estimated number of unemployed CSSA recipients as well as the respective projected amount of CSSA payments in future. In anticipation that the number of CSSA applications would rise further, the Deputy Chairman also considered it vital for the Administration to assess the impact of the increase in CSSA payments on public finance. He requested the Administration to provide information on the number of unemployed CSSA recipients by previous occupation and industry since the outbreak of COVID-19.

(Post-meeting note: The Administration's response was issued to members vide LC Paper No. CB(2)567/20-21(01) on 29 December 2020.)

14. AD(Social Security) responded that since its commencement in June 2020, there had been about 4 000 CSSA applications received under the Special Scheme as of September 2020. The number of CSSA unemployment applications, after reaching its peak in April, remained stable in August and September 2020. There were about 860 CSSA unemployment applications in October 2020. Senior Statistician (Social

Welfare) supplemented that since April 2020, the number of CSSA unemployment cases was around 18 000 to 19 000, representing an annual increase of about 55%. Besides, the unemployment rate had remained high and stood at 6.4% for the quarter August-October 2020. Given the evolving pandemic situation, there could hardly be any accurate forecast or projections of CSSA payments.

15. Mr LUK Chung-hung expressed concern about the long processing time for CSSA applications. To cope with the recent and anticipated increase in workload related to the CSSA Scheme, he suggested increasing the manpower or arranging internal redeployment to expedite the vetting and approval procedures. Mr CHAN Han-pan and Mr Holden CHOW took a similar view that the processing of CSSA applications had been delayed due to the SWD's special work arrangement during the COVID-19 epidemic. They called on the Administration to speed up the processing of CSSA applications so that eligible applicants might receive timely disbursement of CSSA payments.

16. AD(Social Security) assured members that SWD was committed to providing timely social welfare services for those in need. In response to the virus control measures implemented by the Government, the Social Security Field Units ("SSFUs") of SWD had put in place a series of streamlined measures to handle CSSA and SSA applications since late January 2020. These measures included facilitating applicants to make use of the application drop boxes outside SSFUs, or providing application information by post, fax or email, etc. While SSFUs had shortened the opening hours during the outbreak of COVID-19, SWD continued to process CSSA applications in a timely manner. Generally speaking, if CSSA applicants provided all the necessary information, the processing of an application could be completed in four weeks. SWD had also stepped up the manpower of SSFUs starting from May 2020 through engaging retired social security grade officers under the Post-retirement Service Contract Scheme to process CSSA applications without delay.

Rent allowance

17. Mr LEUNG Che-cheung, Mr KWOK Wai-keung and Ms Elizabeth QUAT shared a similar view that MRA under the CSSA Scheme was not adequate to cover the rental expenses of many CSSA households and they had to use the remaining balance of the CSSA payments to pay their rent. As a result, these CSSA recipients might not have enough money to deal with the basic needs of life. Ms QUAT suggested further increasing MRA to cover the actual rent paid by CSSA households. Mr LEUNG was of the

view that MRA should be separated from the calculation of CSSA payments such that the financial assistances given to CSSA households would be able to cover other basic living expenses. Mr CHAN Han-pan opined that MRA could not fully reflect the increase in rental expenses faced by households living in sub-divided units. The Administration should compile a rent index for sub-divided units which would be taken into account when conducting annual adjustment of MRA.

18. USLW reiterated that apart from the substantial increase in MRA from 1 July 2020 on a one-off basis, an upward adjustment of 1.6% in MRA with reference to rent index would also take effect from 1 February 2021 if approved by SFST. The Administration would monitor the situation. AD(Social Security) supplemented that the Community Care Fund re-launched the programme entitled "Subsidy for CSSA Recipients Living in Rented Private Housing" in November 2017 for two years to provide a one-off payment to CSSA households living in private housing and paying a rent exceeding MRA. The programme had been extended to October 2020. Senior Statistician (Social Welfare) supplemented that at present, the Census and Statistics Department did not compile a rent index for sub-divided units.

Annual adjustment of social security payment rates

19. In anticipation that Hong Kong might face a prolonged recession and deflation in the coming few years, Dr CHENG Chung-tai requested the Administration to undertake that the standard payment rates under the CSSA Scheme and the rates of allowances under the SSA Scheme would not be adjusted downward under budget deficit pressure in the three years ahead. He further criticized the Administration for adjusting the rates downward substantially by 11.1% in 2003 which, in his view, had disproportionately affected the vulnerable groups.

20. Mr Wilson OR expressed concern that the current annual adjustment mechanism for the social security payment rates lagged behind the prevailing living costs, thus failing to provide adequate support for CSSA recipients. In the light of the worsening unemployment situation, he urged the Administration to conduct a comprehensive review of the CSSA Scheme.

21. USLW advised that the Administration had completed a review of the "pro-employment" measures and looked into all supplements and special grants under the CSSA Scheme in 2019. Since 2011, there had been an increase of about 38% in the social security payment rates under the

established adjustment mechanism. AD(Social Security) supplemented that according to the prevailing practice, the Administration would review and adjust the social security payment rates under the CSSA Scheme and the SSA Scheme in accordance with the inflation or deflation as reflected by SSAIP for the past 12 months on an annual basis. Separately, the CE's 2019 Policy Address announced a series of improvement measures to the CSSA Scheme to strengthen the assistance for the individuals and families with financial difficulties, including those affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Enhancements to the Old Age Living Allowance Scheme

22. Mr LUK Chung-hung enquired about the implementation of the enhancements to the Old Age Living Allowance ("OALA") Scheme announced by CE in January 2020 including combining the Normal OALA (currently at \$2,770 per month) and the Higher OALA (currently at \$3,715 per month), standardizing the monthly allowance at the Higher OALA rate, and raising the asset limits for applying for the allowance (to \$500,000 for a single elderly person and \$750,000 for a married elderly couple). USLW advised that the Administration would assess the timing of implementation and announce the arrangements at an appropriate juncture.

One-off ex-gratia cash allowance for local citizens confirmed infected with the Coronavirus Disease 2019

23. Noting the Administration's plan to provide a one-off ex-gratia cash allowance of \$5,000 for locally confirmed COVID-19 patients who were not required to undergo any means test ("the ex-gratia allowance"), Mr Vincent CHENG considered that the ex-gratia allowance should only be provided to persons in need. Ms Alice MAK and Ms Elizabeth QUAT urged the Administration to clarify as early as possible that the policy objective of the plan was to encourage citizens who were living from hand to mouth and worried of losing their income if they were tested positive of the virus and hospitalized to take COVID-19 tests.

24. USLW advised that to identify as early as possible the asymptomatic COVID-19 patients in the community to break the transmission chain of virus, the Administration planned to provide the ex-gratia allowance to Hong Kong residents who had contracted COVID-19 locally and would face financial hardship whilst being hospitalized for treatment. In short, the ex-gratia allowance aimed to remove the financial concerns of potentially infected persons from coming forward to take COVID-19 tests. Details of application for the ex-gratia allowance would be announced shortly.

25. The Chairman remarked that the Administration, when providing a one-off ex-gratia allowance to local COVID-19 patients, should take into consideration that the plan might set a precedent for similar subsidies in future.

Motion

26. Mr LUK Chung-hung moved the following motion which was seconded by Ms Alice MAK:

"本委員會強烈要求政府除按年調整綜合社會保障援助 ('綜援') 計劃的金額外，盡快採取以下優化措施，暫時放寬綜援的申領資格，以使綜援制度在嚴峻的經濟環境及失業率高企下，真正發揮'社會安全網'的作用，優化措施包括下述各項：

1. 放寬申請計劃的資產限額；
2. 延長健全成人家庭自住物業納入資產審查的寬免期；
3. 豁免保險計劃的現金價值計算入資產總值內；及
4. 容許以個人名義申請計劃。"

(Translation)

"This Panel strongly requests the Government to, apart from adjusting annually the payment rates under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") Scheme, expeditiously adopt the following enhancement measures to temporarily relax the eligibility criteria for CSSA, so as to bring into full play the function of the CSSA system as a "social safety net" in an austere economic environment coupled with a high unemployment rate. Such enhancement measures include the following:

1. To relax the asset limits for applying for the Scheme;
2. To extend the grace period for excluding the owner-occupied residential property of able-bodied households from the asset test;
3. To disregard the cash value of insurance policies in the calculation of the total value of capital assets; and
4. To allow application for the Scheme on individual basis."

27. The Chairman put the motion to vote. As the majority of members present voted for the motion, the Chairman declared that the motion was carried.

Conclusion

28. The Chairman concluded that members did not object to the submission of the proposals on adjustment of the standard payment rates under the CSSA Scheme and the rates of allowances under the SSA Scheme to FC for consideration.

IV. Study of support for carers

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)337/20-21(05) and (06), and ISSH05/20-21]

29. At the invitation of the Chairman, USLW took members through the progress of the study on support for carers ("the Study") being conducted by LWB with the assistance of the consulting team of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Prof Hector TSANG, Project Leader of the consulting team, then briefed members on the overview of the Study with the aid of a powerpoint.

Scope and progress of the Study

30. Expressing concern that the phenomenon of "seniors caring for seniors" had become more common, Mr Holden CHOW asked how the Study would assist the Administration in attracting and encouraging young persons to develop their profession in the elderly and rehabilitation care services. USLW advised that for the purpose of the Study, "carers" referred to informal carers, namely the family members and foreign domestic helpers ("FDHs") who took care of elderly persons/persons with disabilities in families. Persons employed in the elderly and rehabilitation care service units, however, were not the target of the Study.

31. The Chairman and Ms Alice MAK shared a similar view that the definition of "carers" in the Study which only covered family carers was too narrow and should be expanded to include carers who were not family members but were the sole caregivers of elderly persons or persons with disabilities. The Chairman further opined that the Administration should proactively explore the engagement of persons such as social workers, volunteers or neighbours who might also play the role of carers of elderly persons or persons with disabilities.

32. In response to Mr POON Siu-ping's enquiry about the focus groups participating in studies 3 and 4 under the Study, Prof Hector TSANG explained that the number of carers in each focus group would be capped at 10 in order to allow more in-depth exchange of views. The Study also attempted to invite carers of persons with different categories of disabilities to participate in respective focus groups under study 4 to better identify their specific needs and service expectations.

33. Mr POON Siu-ping further enquired about the selection criteria for conducting in-depth analysis of carer's practices and related policies in other economies. Prof Hector TSANG advised that under the Study, in-depth analysis of four selected economies would be conducted. The selection criteria would be based on whether the carer's practices and related policies implemented by the selected economies were of reference value to Hong Kong and whether the selected economies had any relevancy (e.g. the demographic structure) to local context.

34. Mr LUK Chung-hung held the view that support for carers of children with special education needs ("SEN") should be included in the Study. USLW responded that LWB would consider liaising with the Education Bureau ("EDB") to examine the needs of carers of children with SEN as necessary in future. Mr LUK opined that inter-bureau collaboration among EDB, the Food and Health Bureau and LWB might be necessary.

(At 12:39 pm, the Chairman extended the meeting for 15 minutes beyond the appointed ending time to allow sufficient time for discussion.)

Provision of timely assistance for carers in need

35. Ms Alice MAK was of the view that the assistance measures to support carers should include emotional support, in-kind assistance in recognition of their efforts, readily available services for their elderly persons/persons with disabilities in families to relieve carers from their caring responsibilities temporarily and adequate information on various kind of support services and residential respite places.

36. Ms Elizabeth QUAT expressed grave dissatisfaction that after years of discussion, the Administration failed to provide comprehensive community support services to address specifically the imminent needs of persons with intellectual disabilities and their carers. Given that the supply of home care services was grossly inadequate, carers of persons with intellectual disabilities felt desperate and were in dire need of help. In her view, the commissioning of the Study was merely a stalling tactic.

37. USLW advised that the Study aimed to explore more thoroughly the needs of carers and to address their needs comprehensively. Prof Hector TSANG supplemented that the Study would be conducted in an impartial, objective and scientific manner. The consulting team would seek to understand from carers their service needs and expectations and find out whether the existing services had measured up to their needs and expectations. Ms Elizabeth QUAT called on the Administration to put forth the recommendations of the consulting team by phases in order to expedite the implementation of enhancement measures to support carers. Ms Alice MAK and Mr KWOK Wai-keung also urged the Administration to implement assistance measures for carers at once without having to wait until the Study was completed.

38. Dr CHENG Chung-tai was dissatisfied that the Administration had not taken heed of members' views expressed in the discussion on "Support for carers and provision of residential care services for persons with disabilities" at the special meeting of the Panel on 23 September 2020 and was unable to provide timely assistance and adequate support for carers. Pointing out that several family tragedies involving carers had happened in the past few months, he criticized that the Administration had yet to come up with any concrete proposal to address the pressing needs of carers. Given that the Study would not be able to address the imminent needs of carers shortly, he strongly urged the Administration to provide immediate assistance, say, financial subsidies, to carers and families in need.

39. Expressing concern that carers of persons with intellectual disabilities were under great pressure when centre-based care services or day respite services were not available during the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chairman called on the Administration to provide these carers with emergency support and offer extra help to families with special needs. USLW explained that the number of residential respite places for persons with disabilities had been substantially increased in recent years. The Administration, however, had to balance the provision of respite service places and residential care service ("RCS") places in a residential care home.

40. Mr Holden CHOW and Mr POON Siu-ping enquired about the measures that the Administration would adopt in the interim before the completion of the Study to enhance support for carers. USLW responded that currently, there were eight pilot schemes to assist elderly persons and persons with disabilities to live in the community. In addition to financial assistance, there were other support services for carers including outreaching service, training service, counselling service, demonstrations

and subsidies for acquiring assistive devices, etc. The Administration would also enhance the dissemination of information on support services for elderly persons/persons with disabilities and their carers.

41. Principal Assistant Secretary for Labour and Welfare (Welfare) 3 ("PAS(W)3") supplemented that support services for carers of elderly persons were mainly provided by District Elderly Community Centres ("DECCs"). By adopting an outreaching approach, DECCs would proactively approach carers, particularly aged carers, to understand their service needs and provide them with the necessary assistance such as helping them apply for meal delivery service, home care and day care services. PAS(W)3 further said that the Study sought to identify the support services most needed by carers to facilitate the Administration to set priority for the provision of support services for carers.

42. Mr KWOK Wai-keung noted with concern that due to serious shortage of RCS, carers had to take care of their elderly persons/persons with disabilities in families round-the-clock, rendering them unable to attend to personal matters and be relieved from caring responsibilities temporarily. He also said that many employers had relayed their concern that their FDHs had asked for a wage higher than the minimum allowable wage set by the Government and some had deliberately courted dismissal when they were asked to take care of elderly persons. It was however difficult for the employers to find a replacement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having considered that FDHs played the role of primary carer of elderly persons in many families and facilitated the policy objective of "ageing in the community", Mr KWOK urged the Administration to address the concerns of the employers by promoting professional ethics to FDHs.

43. USLW advised that the Administration had set up service hotlines to help ease the stress of carers. He appealed to members of the public in need to call the 24-hour service hotline of SWD to seek help at an early stage to prevent the occurrence of any family tragedies. As regards FDHs, USLW said that the number of FDHs in Hong Kong had dropped by around 40 000 since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. Against this background, more families would inevitably need to perform a caregiving role of their members who were elderly persons/persons with disabilities.

44. Mr LUK Chung-hung suggested that the Administration should subsidize needy elderly persons and their carers to acquire gerontechnological products such as lifters, hoist and walking aid to help improve the lives of elderly persons as well as reduce the burden and stress of carers. USLW responded that the Administration had established the

Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care ("I&T Fund") to support elderly and rehabilitation service units to procure, rent or try out gerontechnological products. As the I&T Fund did not accept applications from individuals, elderly persons in need might consider renting gerontechnological products from the Gerontech Education and Rental Service Centre set up by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust.

45. Expressing concern that the stringent assessment criteria of the Standardized Care Need Assessment Mechanism for Elderly Services ("SCNAMES") had rendered many frail elderly persons not eligible for subsidized long-term care ("LTC") services, Mr LUK Chung-hung called on the Administration to relax the relevant assessment criteria. He further opined that in view of the high unemployment rate, the Administration should create job opportunities in the healthcare sector. USLW responded that SWD had taken out an initiative to create 1 000 time-limited posts for young persons to enhance technological support on the delivery of services for elderly persons and persons with disabilities such as development and/or implementation of web-based training, networking and communications.

(At 12:59 pm, the Chairman extended the meeting for five minutes beyond the extended ending time with the consent of all members present.)

Pilot schemes on living allowance for carers

46. Noting from the Statistical Highlights entitled "Support for carers" prepared by the Research Office of the Legislative Council Secretariat (LC Paper No. ISSH05/20-21) that the Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Carers of Elderly Persons from Low Income Families ("Pilot Scheme for Carers of Elderly Persons") and Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities ("Pilot Scheme for Carers of Persons with Disabilities") had received a lukewarm response, Mr Holden CHOW enquired whether the Administration had attempted to find out the reasons for the low participation rate. Mr Michael TIEN shared a similar view and sought elaboration on the operation of the Pilot Scheme for Carers of Elderly Persons.

47. USLW advised that one of the aims of the Study was to analyse and explore the way forward for these pilot schemes in order to better address the needs of carers. PAS(W)3 supplemented that under the Pilot Scheme for Carers of Elderly Persons, SWD would issue letters, according to the information of the Central Waiting List ("CWL"), to the elderly persons who were not using any RCS and had been waitlisting for subsidized LTC

services on CWL, to invite their carers to submit application. In order to be eligible for the allowance, the carers were required to meet the income limit and the elderly persons being taken care of should be assessed by SCNAMES as eligible for subsidized LTC services.

48. Having considered that the aim of the Pilot Scheme for Carers of Elderly Persons was to provide carers of elderly persons from low-income families with an allowance to help supplement their living expenses so that elderly persons in need of LTC services might receive proper care and remain ageing in the community, Mr Michael TIEN called on the Administration to remove the restriction that carers receiving the allowance under the Pilot Scheme for Carers of Elderly Persons could not be a recipient of CSSA, OALA or allowance under the Pilot Scheme on Carers of Persons with Disabilities. Senior Researcher (2) responded that the Study would review various pilot schemes in one go with a view to helping the Government consider the way forward to support carers.

V. Any other business

49. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 1:04 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
16 February 2021