

Community Care Fund Programme Subsidy for Low-income Elderly Tenants in Private Housing Evaluation Report

Background

The “Subsidy for low-income elderly tenants in private housing” programme (the programme) under the Community Care Fund (CCF) was implemented by the CCF Secretariat (the Secretariat) commencing 9 July 2012 with the assistance of 113 elderly centres. The application period ended on 31 January 2013. As at 31 March 2013, the Secretariat has received a total of 2 130 applications, and disbursed a subsidy at an amount of about \$10.43 million to 2 106 eligible households (2 608 persons).

Evaluation Results Analysis

(A) *Application Statistics*

(a) Information of households

2. The Secretariat received 2 130 applications. Applicant households came from various districts across the territory. In terms of district which applications were submitted, Sham Shui Po (356 applications), Yau Tsim Mong (292 applications) and Yuen Long (235 applications) had the largest numbers of applicant households. Among the 2 129 applications referred to and vetted by the Secretariat after initial vetting by the elderly centres, 99% (2 106 applications, 2 608 persons) were eligible and 1% (23 applications, 27 persons) were ineligible. Most eligible applications came from one-person households, representing 76.4% of the households disbursed with the subsidy. Two-person and three-or-more-person households represented 23.3% and 0.3% respectively.

3. In terms of income level, the average income of three-or-more-person households amounted to 54% of the relevant income limit under the programme, while one-person and two-person households’ respective figures were about 33% and 31%. In terms of household rental level, the average rent paid by three-or-more-person households was about 73% of the relevant rental limit under the programme, while the respective figures for one-person and two-person households were about 56% and 57%. As for the rental level of various regions, the average rent was higher on Hong Kong Island, but for three-or-more-person households the figure was higher in the New Territories, while the average rent paid by households disbursed with the subsidy represented about 67% to 92% of the average income. Meanwhile, among the ineligible applications, 16 of them were the applicants or household members

receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), 4 owned property in Hong Kong and 3 had already benefited from the “Subsidy for low-income persons who are inadequately housed” programme.

(b) Information of applicants and household members

4. There were a total of 2 840 applicants and household members altogether, of which 2 635 were elders aged 65 or above (with around 99% of them have been benefited from the programme). Among the household members, 194 were aged between 60 and 64 and 11 were mentally incapacitated persons aged below 60. Among the 27 persons who failed the matching procedures, about 67% were CSSA recipients.

(B) *Views of the Programme’s Stakeholders*

(a) Elderly beneficiaries

5. The Secretariat and elderly centres conducted a questionnaire survey with 133 benefited households (about 6% of the benefited households) by random sampling to understand their views on the programme’s subsidy amount, eligibility criteria, application procedures, publicity effort, programme implementation arrangements and services provided by the elderly centres.

6. About 80% of the respondents agreed that the subsidy provided by the programme did relieve their financial pressure brought by inflation and cyclical rental increase, but some respondents would like to see the programme continued with regular subsidy provided to needy elderly people. An absolute majority of the respondents found the programme’s eligibility criteria reasonable and that application procedures were simple and convenient (about 85% and 90% of benefited households respectively). However, some suggested that the programme should include persons aged between 60 and 64 as well, and should also raise the income and rental limits, as well as further streamline the application procedures. Some 75% of the respondents considered the programme’s publicity efforts adequate, but some said there should be more publicity channels and proposed sustained publicity through television, radio and newspapers so that more elders could know the details of the programme. Some 97% of the respondents were satisfied with the Secretariat’s arrangements and the services provided by the elderly centres. Some respondents also looked forward to a re-launched programme, so as to help more needy elderly people and relieve their financial pressure.

(b) Unsuccessful applicants

7. The Secretariat also tried to reach the 23 unsuccessful applicant households for telephone questionnaire survey to collect their views on the programme. Only 15 of these households (about 65%) were reached.

Among these households, 10 (about 67%) were willing to take the survey and complete the questionnaire. The respondents generally considered that the age limit should be lowered to cover those aged 60 to 64; CSSA households should also be eligible; and subsidy amount and income limit should be raised. In general, the respondents agreed that the application procedures of the programme were simple and convenient, but some of them thought that the publicity channels of the programme should be increased for better understanding of the eligibility criteria. However, some respondents were not satisfied about the eligibility criteria of the programme, mainly because they were not able to benefit from the programme, and they suggested that the Secretariat should strengthen publicity, increase the number of places for collecting application forms, and relax eligibility criteria to assist CSSA households and needy elders. All respondents were satisfied with the services provided by the elderly centres.

(c) NGOs/elderly centres engaged to assist in the implementation/staff members of the implementation team under the Secretariat (the implementation team)

8. The Secretariat distributed questionnaires to 35 NGOs and 113 elderly centres participating in the programme for survey, among which 84 NGOs/elderly centres had returned the questionnaires and the response rate was 57%.

(i) Details of the programme

9. About 70% of responding NGOs/elderly centres considered that the subsidy provided by the programme could relieve the financial pressure faced by the elders due to inflation and cyclical rent increase, and some responding NGOs/elderly centres thought that the programme should disburse subsidy regularly, increase the amount of subsidy and consider raising the rental limit. The responding NGOs/elderly centres said that some applicants were found ineligible during the initial vetting mainly because they were non-elderly households, were receiving CSSA, their rents exceeded the limit or they were not renting private housing. In addition, the responding NGOs/elderly centres expressed views on how to improve the programme if it was to be re-launched, including relaxing the eligibility criteria, setting the amount of subsidy according to the rent of districts, strengthening publicity, enhancing support for elderly centres and streamlining application procedures, etc.

(ii) Implementation arrangements and application procedures

10. Most responding NGOs/elderly centres agreed that it was appropriate to entrust elderly centres to assist in implementing the programme, for example, to handle tasks such as helping the elders fill in the application forms, simple checking, conducting home visits and income tests, and distributing cheques.

However, a small number of responding NGOs/elderly centres considered that the Secretariat should carry out all vetting work. On the whole, most responding NGOs/elderly centres agreed that the Secretariat had made suitable arrangements for them, and were satisfied with the Secretariat's arrangements and the operation procedures for implementing the programme. In addition, the responding NGOs/elderly centres expressed views on how to improve the implementation and operational arrangements, including giving more time for NGOs/elderly centres to get prepared for the implementation of the programme, organising briefings and issuing guidelines on handling application earlier, raising administrative fees and providing extra manpower support to elderly centers at the initial period of the programme.

11. Most responding NGOs/elderly centres indicated that they had promoted the programme through their established channels of communication with the elders. Some responding NGOs/elderly centres also put forward other suggestions for improving the application procedures if a similar programme was to be launched in future, including strengthening district coordination, preparing application notes to speed up application process and extending the application period. In conclusion, the responding NGOs/elderly centres were satisfied with the operation arrangements of the programme. They agreed that the programme could help identify the hidden elders in need and said that they were willing to continue to assist in the implementation of similar programmes in future.

12. In the course of implementation, noting the requirement that the beneficiaries must be paying rent but there was no specification on the minimum amount of rent, some NGOs/elderly centres remarked that some elders might benefit from the programme even though they might be paying only nominal rent (for example, paying several dollars for renting their relatives' flats) while those elders who did not have to pay rent could not benefit from the programme. This might not be fair.

13. The staff members of the implementation team agreed that the existing mode of implementation was convenient to the applicants as they could submit their applications to the elderly centres near their residences, and the elderly centres were equipped with professional experience to handle their applications and enquiries. Also, the mode of collaboration between the implementation team and elderly centres was smooth.

14. In addition, the Secretariat held an evaluation meeting on 12 March 2013 to collect views from NGOs/elderly centres on the implementation arrangements and eligibility criteria of the programme. The attending NGOs/elderly centres commented on the programme in terms of subsidy amount, age requirement, income limit, rental limit, types of residence, publicity, prevention of abuse, streamlining of procedures, and administrative fees. The NGOs/elderly centres put forward a number of suggestions on

relaxing the eligibility criteria. In respect of streamlining of procedures, they thought that if similar programmes were to be re-launched in future, the elderly beneficiaries of the programme should be exempted from re-submitting their applications as they had passed the vetting already and it was believed that their living condition would not have much changed since then. They also proposed to screen out ineligible elders according to a vetting checklist so as to speed up the processing of application.

(C) *Public Enquiries and Views*

15. During the implementation period of the programme, the Secretariat had set up an enquiry hotline to provide necessary support and information to the public and staff of the elderly centres. During the period from July 2012 to March 2013, the Secretariat had received 3 132 calls enquiring about the programme, mostly about the programme's eligibility criteria, application processing and administrative arrangements. There were also individual members of the public offering their views on the programme to the Secretariat, including requesting relaxation of eligibility criteria and raising the rental limit.

Conclusion

(a) Number of benefited households/elders

16. At the close of application, the Secretariat had received 2 130 applications, which was less than the estimated beneficiaries of 9 700 households. The estimation on beneficiary number was made by the Secretariat with reference to the largest possible number of beneficiaries (i.e. the figure provided by the Census and Statistics Department on elderly households renting private housing). There was no available information on the income level of relevant households, or whether they were CSSA recipients or owned any properties in Hong Kong. Under the circumstances, the actual number of beneficiaries should be less than the estimation.

(b) Types of residence

17. As for the elderly centres' suggestion that the programme should also include residents in commercial/industrial buildings, the former CCF Steering Committee decided against the idea having regard to the Government's determination to take enforcement actions against the use of industrial buildings for domestic use. It also did not want to indirectly encourage the public to live in industrial/commercial buildings that are not for lawful residential purpose. As such, if the programme was to be re-launched, it should not cover those living in industrial/commercial buildings.

(c) Household income and rental limits

18. As regards the eligibility criteria, while some respondents said the income limit should be raised, the average income of the programme's beneficiaries of one-person to three-or-more-person elderly households represent some 30% to 50% of the income limit. Therefore, the programme's income limit was effective in identifying needy low-income elders.

19. As there was difference in rent among regions (HK Island, Kowloon and New Territories), some considered that there should be different rental limit for different regions. In setting the eligibility criteria (including rental limit), the former CCF Steering Committee had already considered the relevant statistics and adopted a more lenient approach. An analysis of application statistics showed that some regions like Hong Kong Island have higher average rent. Though the rental level for three-or-more-person households was highest in the New Territories, there were only 6 applications from three-or-more-person households, the rental level concerned might not be able to reflect the reality. When compared to the programme's rental limit, the average rent for benefited households was only about 70% of the rental limit of the programme at most. Therefore, the rent paid by most households was still considerably below the rental limit under the programme.

20. In addition, the average rent paid by one-person to three-or-more-person households disbursed with the subsidy represented some 67% to 92% of the average income of households. This was probably because elderly households had lower income in general (average income represented about 30% to 50% of the income limit of the programme) and in some cases the elders' sons or daughters or relatives were paying the rent for the elders and as a result had raised the rent to income ratio accordingly.

(d) Other eligibility criteria

21. There were views that the programme should also cover those CSSA recipients renting private housing. When devising the programme, the former CCF Steering Committee took into account the fact that the Government's one-off or short-term relief measures over the past few years (e.g. paying rent for public housing tenants, providing extra allowance to CSSA recipients, waiving rates, granting subsidy on electricity, etc.) might not benefit non-CSSA elders renting private housing. Therefore, the programme was launched to relieve the pressure of inflation and cyclical rent increase on this group of elders. It might not be appropriate to include CSSA recipients in the programme in this case.

(e) Enhancing publicity and promotion

22. Some considered that there was a lack of diversified channels or

sustained efforts in the promotion of the programme such that it had not reached hidden elders in need of assistance. The survey results also showed that the involvement of elderly centres had helped to effectively promote the programme and identify low-income elders in need.

23. In fact, when launching the programme in July 2012, the Secretariat had made use of a variety of promotion channels including uploading information to the Internet, publishing and printing posters, application forms and programme briefs, holding media briefings, and issuing press release, etc. The Secretariat had placed posters at the Public Enquiry Service Centres of the Home Affairs Department and District Social Welfare Offices of the Social Welfare Department for information of elders. An enquiry hotline was also set up by the Secretariat to provide information to and answer queries from applicants and members of the public. Since September 2012, to encourage more elders to apply for the programme, posters were put up in places like markets, bus stops to which a wider audience have access.

24. In the light of the above comments received in respect of promotion work, if the programme was to be re-launched, the Secretariat would consider increasing the promotion channels and time and consider extending the application period so that elders living in remote areas or hidden elders could have ample time to submit application. Also, the Secretariat would consider inviting elderly centres to assist in implementing similar programme again.

(f) Administrative arrangements

25. Concerning administrative arrangements, elderly centres suggested streamlining of application processing procedures, increasing the number of elderly centres engaged to assist in the implementation of the programme; and strengthening the support to elderly centres that have to handle a relatively larger number of applications. Regarding administrative fees, elderly centres said that the amount of fees could not meet their manpower expenses and would like the Secretariat to disburse the administrative fees to them directly so that they can deploy resources with more flexibility. They also hoped that if the programme was to be re-launched, the Secretariat should give the elderly centres ample time to get prepared and to put forward comments on the programme. The Secretariat should also issue handy application guidelines to elderly centres to expedite processing of applications.

(g) Overall effectiveness

26. As far as the overall effectiveness of the programme is concerned, the elder beneficiaries, NGOs/elderly centres, or the staff members of the implementation team all agreed that the programme helped to relieve the financial pressure of elders and hoped that the CCF could re-launch the programme. Most elders were positive about the service provided by the

elderly centres and agreed that the application procedures were simple and convenient. If the programme was to be re-launched, the Secretariat would make reference to the existing mode of implementation.

27. A consolidated analysis of the information and data collected showed that the stakeholders were positive about the programme and were generally satisfied with the existing operational arrangement. They supported to re-launch the programme so as to help more needy low-income persons. They also suggested that the CCF should consider relaxing the eligibility criteria, increasing publicity channels and enhancing the support to the elderly centres.

28. The programme had reached out to a number of “n have-nots” (generally refer to those who do not own any properties, live in public rental housing or receive CSSA) and provided them with financial assistance. It also helped the elderly centres to identify hidden elders and enabled them to follow up with the welfare needs of the elders on a long-term and sustainable basis. The experience gained in implementing the programme would facilitate the Government’s consideration of more comprehensive poverty alleviation arrangements.

CCF Secretariat
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