

Community Care Fund Programme
Subsidy for Low-income Persons who are Inadequately Housed
Evaluation Report

Background

The “Subsidy for low-income persons who are inadequately housed” programme (the programme) under the Community Care Fund (CCF) was implemented by the CCF Secretariat (the Secretariat) commencing 8 October 2012 with the assistance of 42 community service units. The application period ended on 8 April 2013. As at 31 March 2013, the Secretariat has received a total of 22 250 applications, and disbursed a subsidy at an amount of about \$111.61 million to 18 910 eligible households (44 105 persons).

2. As this programme is similar in nature to another CCF programme, “Subsidy for low-income elderly tenants in private housing” (“subsidy for elderly tenants in private housing” programme), the experience in implementing the latter programme and the approach adopted in its evaluation have been referred to when conducting evaluation on this programme.

Evaluation Results Analysis

(A) *Application Statistics*

(a) Information of households

3. The Secretariat received 22 250 applications. According to the information of 22 127 applications entered into the computer database, applicant households came from various districts across the territory. In terms of district which applications were submitted, Sham Shui Po (6 402 applications), Yau Tsim Mong (3 943 applications) and Kowloon City (2 847 applications) had the largest numbers of applicant households. Among the 19 133 applications referred to and vetted by the Secretariat after initial vetting by community service units, 99% (18 910 applications, 44 105 persons) were eligible and 1% (223 applications, 414 persons) were ineligible. Most eligible applications came from one-person households, representing 32% of the households disbursed with the subsidy. Two-person and three-person households accounted for 26% and 24% respectively, and the remaining 18% or so were four-or-more-person households.

4. Based on the information of the 18 910 households disbursed with the subsidy, in terms of income level, the average income of households from one-person to six-or-more-person amounted to about 57% to 65% of the relevant income limit, of which four-person households accounted for the largest proportion. As for the types of residence among the households disbursed with the subsidy, most of them were residing in rooms/cubicles, cocklofts or bedspaces in private housing (about 89%), followed by those residing in temporary housing (about 10%). Among households residing in rooms/cubicles, cocklofts or bedspaces in private permanent housing, in terms of

household rental level, the one-person and two-person households' average rents paid were higher as a proportion of the relevant rental limits (about 53% and 42% respectively), while the corresponding figures for three-person to six-or-more-person households were about 27% to 37%. As for the rental level of various regions, the average rent was higher on Hong Kong Island and the average rent paid by households disbursed with the subsidy represented about 22% to 47% of the average income (of which the proportion was the highest for one-person households).

5. Meanwhile, among the 223 ineligible applications, the primary reasons were that applicants or the household members were Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients (174 applications), owned property in Hong Kong (25 applications) or already benefited from the “subsidy for elderly tenants in private housing” programme (24 applications).

(b) Information of applicants and household members

6. Based on the data of the 22 127 applications entered into the computer database, there were a total of 51 078 applicants and household members altogether, of which permanent residents and non-permanent residents accounted for 47% and 53% respectively. There were 37 329 persons aged 18 or above (about 73%) and the remaining 13 749 persons were household members aged under 18, which included 8 371 persons aged under 11. About 10 persons were mentally incapacitated household members aged between 18 and 58. The main reason for the 414 persons failing the matching procedures was that they were CSSA recipients (about 79%).

(B) *Views of the Programme Stakeholders*

(a) Beneficiaries

7. The Secretariat and community service units conducted a questionnaire survey with 983 benefited households (about 5% of 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 community service units.

8. About 78% of the respondents agreed that the subsidy provided by the programme did relieve their financial burden, but some respondents hoped that the level of subsidy could be raised and the subsidy should be disbursed on a continuous basis. The vast majority of the respondents found the programme's eligibility criteria reasonable (87%) and that application procedures were simple and convenient (89%). However, some suggested that the income and rental limits could be raised and sub-divided units with individual entrance doors could be covered under the programme, and that the application procedures could be further streamlined and the vetting process could be accelerated. In case the programme was to be re-launched, previous beneficiaries should be exempted from re-submitting their applications. Some 79% of the respondents found the programme's publicity effort adequate, but some said there should be more publicity channels and proposed sustained publicity through television, radio and newspapers. Some 92% of the respondents were satisfied with the

Secretariat's arrangements and some 97% found the services provided by community service units satisfactory. Some respondents also looked forward to an increase in the number of community service units, clearer application guidelines to reduce the frequencies of submitting supplementary documents, as well as simplifying the application form.

(b) Unsuccessful applicants

9. The Secretariat also tried to reach the 223 unsuccessful applicant households for telephone questionnaire survey to collect their views on the programme. Only 101 of these households (about 45%) were reached. Among these households, 80 (about 79%) were willing to take the survey and complete the questionnaire. The respondents generally considered that the level of subsidy of the programme should be raised, and the subsidy should be granted regularly to those in need. While the existing income limit of the programme was able to identify those in need, the respondents thought that the definition of types of residence was relatively complicated, and they also considered that some CSSA recipients who were more needy should also be benefited. About 68% of the respondents agreed that the application procedures of the programme were simple and convenient, but some respondents thought that the application procedures of the programme should be further streamlined, the processing time should be reduced and the number of community service units should be increased. About 59% of the respondents agreed that the publicity effort for the programme was sufficient, but other respondents indicated that the publicity channels of the programme should be increased for better understanding of the application procedures and the eligibility criteria. About 63% of the respondents were satisfied with the Secretariat's arrangement for implementing the programme, and 68% of the respondents found that the service provided by the community service units was satisfactory. However, some respondents were not satisfied that the application guidelines of the programme were not clear enough, mainly because they were not able to benefit from the programme, and they also suggested that the processing time should be reduced, the number of places for collecting application forms should be increased, and the needs of CSSA recipients should be taken into account. Some respondents said that the locations of some community service units were not convenient, while some considered that home visit arrangements would enable social workers to understand their other welfare needs, and they hoped that the CCF could continue to implement this programme, so as to relieve the rental pressure of low-income families.

(c) NGOs/community service units engaged to assist in the implementation/staff members of the implementation team under the Secretariat (the implementation team)

10. The Secretariat distributed questionnaires to 14 NGOs and 42 community service units participating in the programme for survey, among which 26 NGOs/community service units had returned the questionnaires and the response rate was 46%.

(i) Details of the programme

11. About 74% of the responding NGOs/community service units considered that the subsidy provided by the programme could relieve the financial pressure faced by the low-income persons who are inadequately housed, and some responding NGOs/community service units thought that the programme should disburse subsidy regularly. The responding NGOs/community service units said that some applicants were found ineligible during the initial vetting mainly because the types of their residence were not covered by the programme (for example, households living in sub-divided flats with individual entrance doors, large families renting self-contained flats and households living in sub-divided flats in industrial/commercial buildings), they were CSSA recipients or their income level exceeded the limit, etc.

12. Some other NGOs/community service units pointed out that the coverage of the programme should be extended to fishermen households living on vessels. They considered that the living environment of some boat dwellers was as poor as that in temporary housing, and the income limit could exclude those boat dwellers with a high level of income.

13. In addition, the responding NGOs/community service units expressed views on how to improve the programme if it was to be re-launched, including raising the level of subsidy, calculating the subsidy amount on the basis of the difference between market rent and the rent of public rental housing (PRH), relaxing the eligibility to cover the other types of residence, strengthening publicity efforts in rural areas and squatter areas, increasing the number of community service units, streamlining the application procedures, deploying manpower to support community service units with a larger number of applications, and increasing administrative fees to recruit additional manpower, etc.

(ii) Implementation arrangements and application procedures

14. Most responding NGOs/community service units agreed that it was appropriate to entrust community service units to assist in implementing the programme, for example, to handle tasks such as helping applicants fill in the application forms, simple checking, conducting home visits and income tests, and distributing cheques. However, a small number of responding NGOs/community service units considered that home visits and income tests could be handled separately. On the whole, most responding NGOs/community service units agreed that the Secretariat's arrangements (including briefings, service specification, and guidelines on handling applications, etc.) were appropriate, and the collaboration arrangements with the Secretariat were satisfactory. However, some responding NGOs/community service units considered that the roles of handling applications and vetting taken up by the community service units and the Secretariat should be defined in a clearer manner, the guidelines on application should be streamlined, the administrative fees should be raised and the support for community service units should be strengthened.

15. Regarding publicity, most responding NGOs/community service units indicated that they had promoted the programme through the established channels of

communication with the targeted clients, sent staff members to distribute promotional leaflets in mailboxes of targeted buildings, conducted door-to-door visits, and explained the application procedures and helped registration at large-scale temporary housing areas.

16. Some responding NGOs/community service units also put forward other suggestions for improving the application procedures of similar programmes that would be launched in future, including granting higher and advanced administrative fees to community service units for recruiting additional manpower, requiring applicants to provide income proof or introducing asset tests to avoid abuse, increasing the number of community service units engaged to assist in the implementation, distributing application forms in Public Enquiry Service Centres of District Offices of the Home Affairs Department, and providing follow-up programmes to provide support for low-income families. In conclusion, the responding NGOs/community service units were satisfied with the operation arrangements of the programme. They agreed that the programme could help those low-income families who were in need and then follow up with their other welfare needs. They were willing to continue to assist in the implementation of similar programmes in future.

17. In addition, the representatives of NGOs/community service units remarked at the briefings organised for the programme that due to the poor living environment of temporary housing (especially squatter huts and licensed structures), the programme should cover all residents in such residence but not the tenants only. They thought that in view of the relatively loose application approach adopted for the programme, it was possible that some applicants who were living in sub-divided flats that were not covered in the programme, owing to a lack of understanding of the requirement or for other reason, might make an application and be granted with the subsidy as they might not be picked for random checking. Front-line social workers also said that the residence (e.g. squatter huts) of some eligible households might have some “irregularities”, which might keep these families away from making an application. Some NGOs/community service units also said that the CCF should explore whether there was a need to expand the beneficiary coverage of the programme (e.g. whether households living in sub-divided flats in industrial buildings and sub-divided flats with individual entrance doors should be eligible), and required that a mid-term review be conducted on the programme, so as to draw up improvement measures in the course of implementation of the programme.

18. The staff members of the implementation team agreed that the existing mode of operation was convenient to the applicants as they could submit their applications to the community service units near their residences, and the community service units were equipped with professional experience to help handle their applications and enquiries, in particular, effectively identify ineligible applicants through home visits by staff of the units. In addition, through proactive publicity work at district level, community service units had effectively promoted the programme, successfully identified low-income families in need in districts, in particular the street sleepers and squatters, and helped them apply for the programme. Also, the mode of collaboration between the implementation team and community service units was smooth.

19. Apart from this, the Secretariat held an evaluation meeting on 18 March 2013 to collect views from NGOs/community service units on the implementation arrangements and eligibility criteria of the programme. The attending NGOs/community service units 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, etc. The NGOs/community service units put forward a number of suggestions on relaxing the eligibility criteria, such as including the sub-divided flats with individual entrance doors. As for publicity, they considered that more publicity should target at residents living in temporary housing (especially squatter huts) and rural areas, and ethnic minorities, and words/terms used in the publicity materials should be familiar to the public, such as using the colloquial names for “sub-divided flats” and “squatter huts”. In respect of streamlining of procedures, they thought that if similar programmes were re-launched in future, the 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. In addition, they also suggested inviting other NGOs/service units/local organisations (such as Integrated Family Service Centres, Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres and Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities) to help implement the programme in districts without any service units (such as Shatin).

(C) *Public Enquiries and Views*

20. 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 community service units. Public response to the programme was positive, with the Secretariat’s hotline receiving over 4 100 enquiries during the first two weeks, in particular, over 700 enquiries were received each day during the first two days of the programme. As at the end of March, the Secretariat had received 12 374 calls enquiring about the programme, mostly about the programme’s eligibility criteria, application formalities and procedures. There were also individual members of the public offering their views on the programme to the Secretariat. There were views that the Secretariat might consider other approaches (such as “land search”, i.e. checking the land registers in the Land Registry database) to identify which units with an individual entrance door were still “sub-divided flats”, such that all tenants of sub-divided flats might benefit from the programme.

Conclusion

(a) Number of benefited households/persons

21. As at the end of March 2013, the community service units had received about 24 000 applications and referred 22 250 applications to the Secretariat for further processing after initial vetting. With the programme closing in about a week’s time, it is believed that the final number of applications received would be slightly lower than the estimated number of benefited households (27 718 households) as revised in December 2012.

(b) Types of residence

22. Regarding certain organisations/community service units' proposal to include all residents, instead of only tenants, of squatter huts and licensed structures, the former CCF Steering Committee (Steering Committee) approved in August 2012 that all residents of temporary housing, including those not paying any rent, would benefit from the programme as long as they met the programme's other eligibility criteria.

23. According to the evaluation results, stakeholders believed that the definition of "inadequately housed" should be relaxed to include households living in sub-divided flats with individual entrance doors but equally bad environment, as well as those large families renting self-contained units. In considering the living conditions of target beneficiaries to decide on the programme's eligibility criteria, the former CCF Steering Committee wished to identify the neediest groups. The programme's target beneficiaries include those renting rooms/cubicles, cocklofts or bedspaces in private housing, whose living conditions are generally worse than those living in self-contained units or in sub-divided flats with individual entrance door. In addition, sub-divided flats with an individual entrance door might be confused with other units having an individual entrance door (e.g. self-contained small units) as well. There are views that the CCF might consider other approaches (such as "land search") to identify which units with an individual entrance door are still "sub-divided flats", such that all tenants of sub-divided flats would benefit from the programme. However, having consulted the Buildings Department (BD), the Secretariat noted that to identify a building's sub-divided flats, professionals are required to cross-match the building plans in the BD archive with the actual layout of the relevant building on site. There will be considerable difficulty for the frontline social workers of the community service units to carry out such work. To cover sub-divided flats with an individual entrance door under the programme would require the programme to include self-contained small units as well, most of which have already benefited from the government's short-term relief measures in the last few years. In addition, the CCF would have difficulty shouldering the massive disbursement amount under such an arrangement. However, the stakeholders generally believed that the programme's income and rental limits were sufficient to identify the needy low-income persons and if the programme was to be re-launched, the eligibility criteria should be relaxed. The Secretariat will consider whether and how such criteria should be relaxed with reference to the opinions from different sectors.

24. Certain organisations/community service units noted that the living environment of some boat dwellers was as bad as temporary housing and that they needed assistance as well. If the programme was to be re-launched, the Secretariat will also consider including boat dwellers who meet the programme's other eligibility criteria.

25. As for community service units' 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.

(c) Household income and rental limits

26. As for the eligibility criteria, while some respondents said the income limit should be raised, the average income of the benefited households represented some 57% to 65% of the income limit. Therefore, the programme's income limit was effective in identifying needy low-income persons. There were also views that reference could be made to the updated income limit for applying PRH to revise the income limit under the programme. If the programme was to be re-launched, the Secretariat will consider the relevant updated data.

27. There were also views that the programme's rental limit should be raised and revised according to the changes in rental level. When devising the programme's eligibility criteria (including setting the rental limit), the former CCF Steering Committee had already considered the relevant statistics and adopted a more lenient approach in doing so. According to the statistics provided by the Census and Statistics Department, the median rent paid by inadequately housed one-person household in the fourth quarter of 2011 was \$1,500. As such, the programme's rental limit, which was 50% of a particular household size's respective income limit (i.e. \$4,370 for one-person household), should be appropriate. From the analysis of the application statistics, it is apparent that some regions like Hong Kong Island have higher rent. However, as compared to the programme's rental limit, the average rent for benefited households in various regions were only about 50% of the respective limit at most. Therefore the rent paid by most households was still considerably below the respective rental limit under the programme.

28. In addition, the average rent paid by one-person to six-or-more-person households disbursed with the subsidy represented some 22% to 47% of their average income. Therefore, setting the rental limit at 50% of respective household income limit was considerably lenient.

(d) Other eligibility criteria

29. There were views that the programme should also cover others who were also inadequately housed as well as needy CSSA recipients. When devising the programme, the former CCF Steering Committee took into account the fact that the continued rise in inflation and private property rents posed considerable financial pressure on inadequately housed low-income persons who were not receiving CSSA, and 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 this group of persons. Therefore, the programme was launched to relieve the financial pressure of those low-income persons who were inadequately housed. It might not be appropriate to include CSSA recipients in the programme in this case.

(e) Prevention of abuse

30. There were views that only requiring applicants to declare their household income in the application form was too lenient, and for some cases which were not

selected for home visits/income tests, sole reliance on self-declaration might lead to abuses. Some community service units also proposed requiring applicants to provide income proof for their applications or introducing an asset test. However, other views noted that it might be hard for the community service units that received a larger number of applications to conduct home visits/income tests. If applicants could explain suspicious income items, they should also be considered having passed the vetting. If the programme was to be re-launched, a balance should be struck between the prudent use of CCF resources and streamlining relevant procedures.

(f) Enhancing publicity and promotion

31. Some considered that there was a lack of diversified channels or sustained efforts in promoting the programme such that it had not reached those in the rural areas or in the squatter areas. Some also pointed out the need to enhance promotion to ethnic minorities. The survey results also showed that some community service units had leveraged on their current activities and had successfully promoted the programme and identified low-income persons in need.

32. In fact, when launching the programme in October 2012, the Secretariat had made use of a variety of promotion channels including uploading information to the Internet, publishing posters, printing application forms and programme briefs, holding press 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 applicants. An enquiry hotline was set up by the Secretariat to provide information to and answer queries from applicants and members of the public.

33. In the light of the above comments from the community on the promotion work, the Secretariat agreed that the promotion channels and sustainability of efforts should be enhanced. With reference to the views of the community service units, the publicity materials should use wordings that the public were familiar with, such as the colloquial names for “sub-divided flats”, “squatter huts”, etc. As regards the comment that the enquiry hotline was difficult to get through at the beginning of the programme, the Secretariat should also consider increasing the number of hotlines to cope with the demand.

(g) Administrative arrangements

34. Concerning administrative arrangements, the community service units made the following suggestions: streamlining of application processing procedures; increasing the number of community service units engaged to assist in implementing the programme; and strengthening the support to units that have to handle a relatively larger number of applications. Regarding administrative fees, community service units called for a raise in fees and the disbursement in advance for hiring extra manpower to handle the applications. If the programme was to be re-launched, apart from community service units, the Secretariat should also consider inviting other NGOs/service units/local organisations to assist in implementing the programme, in particular for the Eastern, Wong Tai Sin and Shatin districts which do not have any community service units.

Moreover, increasing and advancing the disbursement of administrative fees would facilitate the community service units in the arrangement of its work.

(h) Overall effectiveness

35. As far as the overall effectiveness of the programme is concerned, the beneficiaries, NGOs/community service units, or the staff members of the implementation team all agreed that the programme helped to relieve the financial pressure of low-income persons who are inadequately housed and hoped that the CCF could re-launch the programme. Most beneficiaries were positive about the service provided by the community service units and agreed that the application procedures were simple and convenient.

36. 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 operation 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 community service units.

37. The programme had reached out to a number of “n have-nots” (generally refer to those who do not own any properties, live in PRH or receive CSSA) and provided them with financial assistance. By identifying low-income persons who are in need, the community service units were able to follow up with the welfare needs of low-income persons on a long-term and sustainable basis. Finally, 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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