

Commission on Poverty

District Study on Employment Assistance

Summary of the Government's Response to Recommendations

PURPOSE

This paper invites Members to consider the Government's response to the recommendations made in the Report of the District Study on Employment Assistance ("the Report").

BACKGROUND

2. The Commission discussed the draft Report on 27 March 2006. Members have tasked the Secretariat to coordinate with relevant parties¹ on their response to the recommendations, taking into account the key objectives and directions deliberated by the Task Force on District-based Approach².

KEY DIRECTIONS

3. The Administration generally agreed with the Task Force's proposed directions to improve our employment assistance through *improving service interface* and *strengthening district networks* in order to implement a more "people-oriented" approach and assist the "difficult-to-employ".

¹ These include the key bureaux/departments of CoP, viz. Economic Development and Labour Bureau/Labour Department (LD), Health, Welfare and Food Bureau/Social Welfare Department (SWD); Education and Manpower Bureau/Employees Retraining Board (ERB); and Home Affairs Bureau/Home Affairs Department.

² Members may refer to CoP Paper 6/2006 for details.

Improving Service Interface

4. In terms of improving interface and coordination, SWD, LD and ERB have worked together and considered a number of further improvements to enhance coordination/integration in delivering employment assistance (highlighted in paragraph 6 below). With regard to Members' proposal to set up a dedicated employment agency to promote "from welfare-to-work" and oversee employment-related initiatives, the Administration agrees that this is an area worth further exploration. However, it is recognized that this is a major policy decision and as such its resource and other implications will need to be fully and carefully considered. For progress in the short to medium term, it is proposed that priority be accorded to better coordination, sharing of information and, where appropriate, referrals, among related programmes.

Strengthening District Networks

5. The Administration agrees that there is room for further enhancing district networks on employment issues. Currently, there are forums at the district level (sub-committees / working groups under the District Councils, such as Labour and Economic Committee) which discuss issues relating to local employment. Job centres also actively reach out to local employers. As an enhancement, LD and SWD offices at the district level would strengthen their coordination and collaboration. The new job centres in North District and Yuen Long, which will be opened in the latter half of September 2006, are expected to strengthen the local district networks in promoting employment in these relatively remote areas.

6. In addition, the Home Affairs Department assists in the coordination of the work of bureaux and departments at the district level in promoting employment and helping the disadvantaged. Dedicated task forces have been formed in some districts chaired by the respective District Officers to strengthen the co-ordination of poverty alleviation work. The new "Enhancing Self Reliance Through District Partnership Programme" supports sustainable poverty alleviation projects with a clear employment focus, and encourages district partnerships in this regard. A new pilot project on community engagement has been launched in Tin Shui Wai to explore options to capitalize on under-utilized district resources for sustainable poverty alleviation, including employment issues. Lastly, a study on district-based support for the disadvantaged is being conducted and will recommend best practices of district coordination on poverty issues, including employment.

IMPROVEMENTS

7. The key points of the Government's response to the 18 recommendations in the Report of the District Study on Employment Assistance are set out at *Annex*. Based on existing Government structure, relevant bureaux and departments have agreed to implement a range of improvement measures, highlighted below -

- LD will, *on first registration* at Job Centres, provide *more comprehensive employment information* to the unemployed, including programmes of SWD and ERB which suit their needs in order to make employment service more user-friendly and target-oriented;
- LD's *Job Matching Programme* will be made *more targeted* to help the difficult-to-employ cases/long-term unemployed;
- LD will continue to promote the *Work Trial Scheme* in order to provide more work trial opportunities for the long-term unemployed;
- LD's *new job centres in the North and Yuen Long* districts will help strengthen the local district employer networks and employment services to job-seekers;
- LD and SWD will enhance *staff training on employment assistance services* through sharing and briefings;
- SWD will enhance the *personalized elements* in Intensive Employment Assistance Projects (*IEAPs*);
- *Retraining service in TSW is strengthened* in terms of the number of training centres operating retraining courses and the number of training places offered to TSW residents;
- ERB would consider setting up *new Retraining Resource Centre* in the New Territories to promote continued employment support in the more remote areas;
- A number of initiatives are underway to *promote social enterprise development* to provide training/work opportunities to the unemployed; and

- The continued focus in using a *district-based approach* to alleviate and prevent poverty should enhance district capacities in encouraging district partnerships, promoting employment and using district resources to help the disadvantaged.

8. In terms of work incentives, ERB has launched the pilot Transport Support Scheme to provide transport assistance to retrainees residing in Yuen Long, Islands and North districts with effect from 1 April 2006. SWD will also launch in Tsuen Wan/Kwai Tsing, Tung Chung and Tin Shui Wai in late 2006 the District Employment Assistance Trial Projects which include a ‘return-to-work’ payment to give incentives to those ‘difficult-to-employ’ who secure a job. The Health, Wealth and Food Bureau would conduct a more detailed examination of the arrangements of disregarded earnings as a form of work incentive by 2006/07.

ADVICE SOUGHT

9. The Administration shares the views of the Commission on the need to continue to improve coordination and strengthen employment assistance to help the unemployed to move to work. Members are invited to consider the key points of the Government’s response to the recommendations. In relation to deeper agency integration, as set out in paragraph 4, the Administration would need to give careful consideration to the full implications of this major policy decision.

Commission Secretariat
September 2006

CoP – District Study on Employment Assistance

Summary of Key Points of the Government’s Response to 18 Recommendations

Short-term deliverables (ST) Longer-term consideration (LT)

Recommendations	Government’s Response
<p>Recommendation 1 - A More User-friendly and Target-Oriented Approach: It is suggested that service operators should provide users with a more integrated picture of the services available (para. 4.5).</p>	<p>The Administration agreed with the recommendation and would strengthen the following measures -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consolidated employment information: relevant departments will together produce information leaflets on all employment assistance and services available to facilitate users to get a more integrated picture (<i>Short-term (ST)</i>). ➤ Provide job-seekers with a more integrated picture of employment services on first registration (ST): placement officers of Job Centres will conduct an inception interview and introduce the services of ERB/SWD to provide them with a more integrated picture of the services available. ➤ Make available more comprehensive information of employment services (ST): Job Centres, Social Security Field Units and ERB’s training bodies will make available more comprehensive information on employment services provided by different parties.

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 2 - Job Orientation: It is suggested that on-the-job training and orientation programmes for front-line staff be provided to enhance their understanding of the detailed operations of different employment services. In the longer term, a professional standard for the practitioners of the employment service needs to be established (para. 4.6)</p>	<p>The Administration agreed with the recommendation and would strengthen the following measures -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide briefings/training for frontline staff on employment services (ST): SWD, LD and ERB agreed to exchange officers to deliver talks at appropriate fora, e.g. LD's annual seminar for employment services, orientation training programme for EA Coordinators. ➤ Strengthen liaison between frontline staff of LD, SWD and ERB on employment services (ST): Job Centre Managers and Officers-in-charge, Employment Assistance Teams (District) will maintain close contact at operational level, e.g. keep updated on latest employment services information. ➤ To keep in view the longer-term need of establishing a professional standard for the practitioners of employment assistance service (<i>Long-term (LT)</i>)

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 3 - Employment Pathway: It is suggested that the existing employment services be reorganised into three clear employment pathways, viz. a Universal Employment Service, a Special Employment Service and an Intensive Employment Service (para.4.7).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Administration agreed with the concept in principle but its delivery would require substantial restructuring of the different services by different departments. ➤ In the short term, the Administration would continue to make employment services more user-friendly and target oriented.
<p>Recommendation 4 - Service Coordination: At policy level, the coordination between the LD and SWD should be strengthened to avoid service duplication and gaps. In the long run, the Government should consider whether there are merits for setting up a dedicated agency for implementing the 'unemployment-to-work' policy (para. 4.8).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ LD and SWD have explored how to avoid service duplication and abuse (ST), e.g. by not allowing IEAP participants to join Job Matching Programme (JMP) in LD. ➤ The setting up of a dedicated employment agency to promote "from unemployment-to-work" and oversee all employment-related initiatives is worth further exploration. However, it is recognized that this is a major policy decision and its resource and logistical implications would need to be fully and carefully considered. The Administration would need to give careful consideration to the full implications of this major policy decision. (<i>LT</i>).

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 5 - Job Centre: The LD can consider strengthening the role of Job Centre by: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● targeting the JMP service also at welfare recipients; ● using the length of unemployment as one of the key screening criteria to join JMP; ● tracing failed cases of the JMP service; ● exploring more relevant job opportunities at the lower end of the labour market at district level; and ● strengthening the function of Employment Information Corner (para. 4.9). 	<p>The Administration agreed with the recommendation and would strengthen the following measures (<i>ST</i>) –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ JMP would be more targeted to the “difficult to employ” - LD will encourage those unemployed for more than 3 months to join JMP; and ➤ LD will consider how to trace failed cases of JMP when they revamp the computer system around 2008. <p>In terms of lower end jobs, LD is also exploring such opportunities³. At district level, LD will canvass local vacancies through newspapers and employer networks. LD will also regularly review and enrich the resource corners of Job Centres.</p>

³ About 40% of LD's vacancies come from establishments of less than 5 persons and 22% require educational attainment of only primary 6 or below. All enterprises, regardless of their size, are encouraged to place vacancies with us through iES or fax to JVPC

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 6 - Retraining Service The ERB can consider strengthening the retraining service by: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strengthening the retraining service in TSW areas; ● studying the feasibility of providing temporary transport assistance to users who live in remote areas; ● extending the service provision of ERB to the unemployed aged 25-29; ● including the practical skills assessment in other retraining courses; and ● relocating the existing RRC or setting up another RRC in YL district or in NT. 	<p>ERB will implement the following improvement measures –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Retraining service in TSW is strengthened in terms of the number of training centers operating retraining courses and the number of training places offered to TSW residents (<i>ST</i>). ➤ ERB has launched the pilot Transport Support Scheme to provide transport assistance to retrainees residing in Yuen Long, Islands and North districts with effect from 1 April 2006 (<i>ST</i>). ➤ The extension of ERB clientele to unemployed below 30 has profound policy and resource implications (<i>LT</i>). ➤ ERB aims to extend its practical skills assessment to all retraining courses by phases. It has been extended from domestic helper training to personal care workers as well as for health massage/foot reflexology training (<i>ST</i>). ➤ Subject to availability of resources, ERB agrees to consider opening new RCC in the New Territories (<i>ST</i>).

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 7 - IEAP: The SWD can consider strengthening the employment services to CSSA recipients by:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extending the IEAP services to long-term unemployed JMP users; • strengthening the personalized element of IEAP; 	<p>The Administration agreed with the recommendation and would strengthen the following measures –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Currently, IEAP operators may serve up to 30% near-CSSA unemployed. Long-term unemployed JMP participants not on CSSA (for more than one-year) would be encouraged to use IEAP service and SWD would send to LD information leaflets on IEAP for distribution (<i>ST</i>). ➤ SWD will enhance the personalized elements of IEAP. This is also recommended by the Evaluation Report of IEAP prepared by study team of Chinese University (<i>ST</i>).

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 8 - Intensive Employment Service: Relevant departments can consider strengthening the following Intensive Employment Service by:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using voluntary mentors from professional bodies to help the unemployed; • considering inclusion of post-employment support and life-long learning in employment assistance programmes; and • providing job attachment services and social enterprise (SE) programmes for the long-term unemployed (para. 4.11). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some of the existing programmes have already put in place post-employment support services, e.g. AEA, IEAPs and RRC. The Administration will continue to explore room to further strengthen this aspect (see also Recommendation 6 relating to RRC) ➤ A number of initiatives are also underway to promote SE development to provide training/work opportunities to the unemployed (reference CoP Paper 12/2006 for the meeting on 13 June 2006).

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 9 - Case Matching: A mechanism of tracing cases and service records across departments should be put in place to ensure effective provision of support (para. 4.12).</p>	<p>Currently, data matching is in place between SWD and LD (the Work Trial Scheme (WTS) cases) and SWD and ERB (CSSA recipients attending ERB re-training courses and receiving allowance) to ensure effective service delivery, and that CSSA is paid correctly.</p> <p>A more integrated mechanism in tracing cases and ensuring effective intervention is also linked to Recommendations 3 and 4 on the need to establish a new integrated set-up with a clear employment pathway catered for the needs of the unemployed. <i>(LT)</i></p>
<p>Recommendation 10 - District Coordination: There is room for further enhancing district coordination for discussion of employment issues and identification of service gaps and discrepancies in the community (para. 4.13).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It is agreed that Centre Managers of Job Centres/LD and Officers-in-charge of Employment Assistance Teams (District)/SWD would meet regularly and conduct briefing sessions for each other and exchange district-based activities and information, e.g. information of Job Fairs <i>(ST)</i>. ➤ LD's new job centres in the North and Yuen Long districts will also help strengthen the local district employer networks and employment services to job-seekers <i>(ST)</i>. ➤ Dedicated task forces have been formed in some districts chaired by the respective District Officers to strengthen the co-ordination of poverty alleviation work. ➤ The new "Enhancing Self Reliance Through District Partnership Programme" supports poverty alleviation projects with a clear employment focus, and encourages district partnerships in this regard. ➤ A study on district-based support for the disadvantaged is being conducted and will recommend best practices of district coordination on poverty issues, including employment. A new pilot project on community engagement has been launched in Tin Shui Wai to explore district engagement strategies, including on employment issues.

<p>Recommendation 11 - Outreach Service: It is suggested that the LD deploys more resources for approaching potential employers of small and local businesses at district level (para. 4.14).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ LD liaises closely with employers, including small businesses. About 40% of LD's vacancies come from establishments of less than 5 persons.
<p>Recommendation 12 - Employer Networking Strategies: It is suggested that JCs should strengthen its district employer networks irrespective of size of business operations (para. 4.15).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ LD builds employer networks irrespective of size of business.
<p>Recommendation 13 - Employment Club: It is suggested that an Employment Club be set up in TSW area to train volunteers to assist job developers in exploring job opportunities (para. 4.16).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ NGOs providing employment services can be encouraged to strengthen their services in this direction on a trial basis to test its effectiveness or to support organising activities on poverty alleviation. Additional district funding under the "Enhancing Self Reliance Through District Partnership Programme" can be used to support such projects.

<p>Recommendation 14 - Public Education: It is suggested that the positive aspects of TSW be promoted more with a view to reducing the employers' negative image of TSW (para. 4.17).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Government regularly spends PR efforts to reduce the negative image of TSW. However, such efforts cannot solely be done by the Government and can be easily overshadowed by negative reports.
<p>Recommendation 15 - Job Market Information: There is room for greater sharing of job market information and employer network among providers of employment assistance (para. 4.18).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ LD has already provided the employer network database through VSTs and iES. ➤ It has been one of SWD's consideration of NGOs' ability to build up/extend their employment network.
<p>Recommendation 16 - Active Workplace Attachment: It is suggested that the Active Workplace Attachment can be run in two modes: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ a Social Enterprise Programme; and ➤ granting long-term unemployed priority in the WTS (para. 4.19). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A number of initiatives are also underway to promote SE development to provide training/work opportunities to the unemployed (reference: CoP Paper 12/2006 for the meeting on 13 June 2006). ➤ Long-term unemployed have already been given priority to join WTS. LD will continue to promote WTS so as to invite more companies to offer work trials for the long-term unemployed. ➤ SWD will assist long-term CSSA able-bodied unemployed recipients in some districts to participate in the District Employment Assistance Trial Projects and move to self-reliance.

Recommendations	Government's Response
<p>Recommendation 17 - Employment Incentive Allowance: It is worthwhile to study ways of providing financial incentives to help the unemployed meet immediate costs associated with starting work and to keep the 'difficult-to-employ' in employment (para. 4.20).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Administration would keep in view the experience in implementing the Travel Support Scheme as announced in the Budget, which provides short-term financial relief for ERB retrainees to attend job interviews and/or to commute to work during their initial period of employment. ➤ The Administration would continue to consider how to promote work, including through providing transport support to those living in remote areas having to commute long distance to work, and to implement a trial scheme in 2006/07.
<p>Recommendation 18 - Reemployment Bonus: It is suggested to provide able-bodied CSSA a reemployment bonus for retaining jobs (para. 4.21).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The District Employment Assistance Trial Projects which include a 'return-to-work' payment to give incentives to those 'difficult-to-employ' who secure a job will be launched in late 2006. Separately, SWD is reviewing the arrangement of disregarded earnings (DE) under the CSSA Scheme which serves as an incentive to assist unemployed recipients to find and sustain employment and move towards self-sufficiency.