

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)1949/00-01

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seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Friday, 8 June 2001 at 8:30 am
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building**

- Members Present** : Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP (Chairman)
Hon CHAN Yuen-han (Deputy Chairman)
Hon David CHU Yu-lin
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Hon LI Fung-ying, JP
- Members Absent** : Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon Henry WU King-cheong, BBS
Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung
Hon WONG Sing-chi
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee
- Public Officers Attending** : Mrs Annette TANG
Departmental Secretary
Social Welfare Department
- Mr James SIA To-sang
Deputy Departmental Secretary (Establishment)
Social Welfare Department

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Deputations by Invitation : Government Social Work Officers Association

Mr Peter NG Ka-him
Chairman

Mr Timothy HO Kin-chung
Vice-chairman

Mr James LAM Chi-ming
Secretary

Social Work Assistant Branch, Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association

Mr LAI Wing-shing
Chairman

Mr LEUNG Wai-ngai
Vice-chairman

Mr TAM Hin-wai
Public Relations

Social Security Assistants Branch, Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association

Mr CHAN Chun-wah
Chairman

Mr WONG Chi-tung
Vice-chairman

Mr TONG Chi
Executive Committee Member

Clerk in Attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Assistant Secretary (2) 4

Staff in Attendance : Miss Mary SO
Senior Assistant Secretary (2) 8

I. Meeting with representatives of three staff associations to discuss the re-organisation of the Social Welfare Department (SWD)
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1719/00-01(01)-(02))

The Chairman welcomed representatives of the Administration and representatives of the Government Social Work Officers Association, the Social Work Assistant Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association, and the Social Security Assistants Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association to the meeting. The Chairman then invited the three staff associations to give their views on the re-organisation of SWD.

Government Social Work Officers Association (GSWOA)

2. Mr Peter NG of GSWOA presented the views of GSWOA outlined in its submission (LC Paper No. CB(2)1719/00-01(01)) which supported the re-organisation of SWD to address new demands arising from the changing welfare needs of the community. As the re-organisation exercise would inevitably give rise to changes to the staffing structure, particularly at the district level, given that the exercise was by and large cost-neutral, Mr NG pointed out that GSWOA had already initiated discussions with the management urging it to have regard for such when deciding the timing and pace of implementation.

Social Work Assistant (SWA) Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association (HKCCSA)

3. Mr LAI Wing-shing of SWA Branch of HKCCSA took members through the SWA Branch of HKCCSA's submission (LC Paper No. CB(2)1719/00-01(02)). He pointed out that although the SWA Branch of HKCCSA supported the idea of re-organisation of SWD, it nevertheless had the following concerns/criticisms -

- (a) The re-organisation exercise, whilst strengthening the role of the existing 13 District Social Work Officers (DSWOs) (proposed to be upgraded to D1 rank), had disregarded the need for more SWA grade staff for the Planning and Co-ordination Team to be set up in each of the 13 SWD districts under the new structure to carry out enhanced outreaching services;
- (b) The situation whereby Regional Officers (ROs) were allowed to deviate from the rules and administrative directives set down by the headquarters on ground of the unique characteristics of the districts under their management in handling clients/cases had caused much confusion to the frontline staff and, this, in turn, had led to many inconsistencies in the

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services provided within a district as well as among districts. It was envisaged that such a situation would be aggravated under the new structure when the existing 13 DSWOs assumed the overall responsibility in planning and delivering welfare services in the districts under their purview; and

- (c) SWD should have taken the opportunity of the re-organisation exercise to rectify the long-standing staffing irregularities whereby jobs of equal responsibilities were performed by staff of different grades. A case in point was that the medical social worker posts in the contagious disease clinics and non-contagious disease units of SWD were currently filled by 15 SWA grade staff (MPS 10-29) and 286 Assistant Social Work Officers (MPS 13-33) grade staff respectively.

Social Security Assistants (SSA) Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association (HKCCSA)

4. Representatives of SSA Branch of HKCCSA said that the SSA Branch of HKCCSA supported the changing of the current three-tiered structure of SWD to two-tiered in principle, in order to better meet the operational requirements and new challenges arising from changing welfare needs of the community. It, however, was of the view that the discretion to waive the requirements relating to social security applications/cases should rest with the headquarters, say, by a directorate staff or a committee, so as to avoid the existing situation whereby each RO was allowed to act on their own device to waive the same.

Discussion

5. Referring to the comments made by SWA and SSA Branches of HKCCSA in paragraphs 3(b) and 4 above, the Chairman asked whether they considered that the power to exercise discretion in handling welfare cases and social security applications/cases should be centralised at the headquarters level. Representatives of SWA Branch of HKCCSA clarified that they did not insist on such but was of the view that headquarters should ensure that the District Officers (DOs) under the new structure would adhere to the rules, guidelines and administrative directives laid down by the headquarters. Mr TAM Hin-wai of SWA Branch of HKCCSA pointed out that, at present, not only was the application of rules and guidelines pertaining to provision of welfare services not uniform, agreements reached with staff associations, such as compensatory-off for overtime work, were sometimes not followed by ROs at the district level, i.e compensatory-off accumulated at a certain office might not be recognised by another office within SWD.

6. Representatives of SSA Branch of HKCSSA said that although they did not oppose the re-organisation exercise, they nevertheless had concern that if the exercise

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only focussed on strengthening the senior management level at the district level and ignored the need for strengthening frontline staff, productivity and service quality would not improve. A case in point was that the management continued to apply a delaying tactic to address the long-standing manpower shortage problem of SSAs. With the failure of the new Computerised Social Security System (CSSS), launched in October 2000, to reduce the workload of SSAs, the management, instead of increasing staff to relieve the work pressure of SSA grade staff, had decided to engage an outside consultant to conduct a risk management study on the social security system first before conducting an overall review of the manpower situation of SSAs. Representatives of SSA Branch of HKCSSA also said that they did not see the need for upgrading the head of each SWD district to D1 rank under the new structure.

7. Mr Peter NG of GSWOA said that upgrading DOs to D1 rank was justified, having regard to the fact that their role would be strengthened as a district welfare planner and service co-ordinator. He expressed reservation about reverting the power to exercise discretion on matters pertaining to provision of welfare services and social security applications/cases to the headquarters, as this would undermine the decision-making process in response to district matters. In the GSWOA's views, concerns raised regarding inconsistencies in the handling of welfare cases and administrative matters such as staff leave were merely technicalities which could be resolved through discussion between the management and the staff side. To this end, GSWOA hoped that the management would give due regard to staff's views and concerns in the course of implementing the re-organisation exercise.

8. Noting the rather negative views expressed by SWA and SSA Branches of HKCCSA regarding the re-organisation of SWD, Ms LI Fung-ying and Miss CHAN Yuen-han enquired how SWD had gone about consulting its staff.

9. Departmental Secretary of SWD (DS/SWD) responded that staff of SWD had been consulted widely through briefings/unit meetings and focus groups since the issue of an internal consultation paper on 12 December 2000. Staff associations had also been separately briefed on the re-positioning exercise. Altogether 12 briefing sessions and more than 50 focus groups had been conducted from December 2000 to February 2001. The general feedback was positive and supportive of the re-organisation. The final package had taken on board views and comments from staff expressed during consultation exercise. When the management briefed supervisory staff and staff associations on 24 April 2001, the finalised re-organisation package was well accepted by both groups. Their comments were by and large confined to technicalities and the timing and pace of implementation. DS/SWD further said that senior management staff had already started to brief all staff on the details of the re-organisation package to prepare and involve them in mapping out the requisite changes to ensure that the pace of implementation would suit the readiness of individual districts and branches resulting in a more seamless transition. Staff

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associations were also assured that an effective two-way dialogue would be maintained to address any concerns and technicalities.

10. DS/SWD explained that as the primary aim of the re-organisation exercise was to provide a better framework for the provision of welfare services, issues such as manpower shortage of SSAs, would be dealt with separately by SWD. DS/SWD, however, said that it was too early to conclude that the CSSS could not help to reduce the workload of SSAs, as during the past six months staff had to acquaint themselves with the new system and spend time in converting data to the system. SWD intended to conduct an overall review of the manning requirement of the Social Security Field Units (SSFUs) after completion of the risk management study on the social security system. Regarding the concern about inconsistencies in the handling of welfare cases and administrative matters such as staff leave, DS/SWD said that it was important to provide DOs with discretionary power in discharging their duties. Nevertheless, to deter DOs from using their discretionary power indiscriminately, the headquarters would monitor how DOs wielded their discretionary power and action would be taken to step up communication between the headquarters and district levels. As to the concern about inadequate support for frontline line staff, DS/SWD said that with additional resources allocated to SWD in 2001/02 to strengthen services relating to family and child welfare, medical social work, youth at risk, single parent and new arrivals, additional staff would be recruited to cope with increased workload. In respect of strengthening support for the handling of social security applications/cases, DS/SWD said that the number of Senior Social Security Officers would be increased from the existing five to seven to oversee the SSFUs in 13 SWD districts under the new structure.

11. The Chairman noted that GSWOA and the SWA and SSA Branches of HKCCSA supported the proposed re-organisation package in principle, although there were concerns about DOs having too much of a free hand in dealing with welfare cases and social security applications/cases which, in turn, would give rise to inconsistencies and cause much confusion to frontline staff. In view of such concerns expressed at the meeting, the Chairman said that members should consider them and decide whether to support the proposed re-organisation package which SWD planned to submit to the Establishment Subcommittee of the Finance Committee on 13 June 2001 to effect the necessary changes involving directorate posts.

12. In concluding the discussion, the Chairman suggested and members agreed to discuss the following issues at future meetings of the Panel -

- (a) Follow-up on the manpower situation of SSAs;
- (b) Exercising of discretionary power by DOs in discharging their duties;
and

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(c) Staffing arrangement for medical social worker posts.

13. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 9:48 a.m.

Legislative Council Secretariat

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