

立法會
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LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of meeting
held on Friday, 13 October 2000 at 10:15 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building

Members Present : Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP (Chairman)
Hon CHAN Yuen-han (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, JP
Hon Henry WU King-cheong, BBS
Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung
Hon WONG Sing-chi

Members Absent : Hon David CHU Yu-lin
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon CHOY So-yuk
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee

Member Attending : Hon LEUNG Fu-wah, MH, JP

Public Officers Attending : Dr E K YEOH, JP
Secretary for Health and Welfare

Mr W H HO, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare (2)

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Mr Robin GILL, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare (3)

Mrs Fanny LAW, JP
Secretary for Education and Manpower

Mr Philip K F CHOK, JP
Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower (1)

Mrs Carrie LAM, JP
Director of Social Welfare

Mr K Y TANG
Government Economist

Mrs Pamela TAN, JP
Commissioner for Labour

Mrs Betty FUNG
Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs (2)

Mrs S M LAI
Chief Housing Manager/Application

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

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

I. Briefing by the Secretary for Health and Welfare on the Chief Executive's Policy Address 2000

At the invitation of the Chairman, Secretary for Health and Welfare (SHW) briefed members on the measures to help the poor and the needy as detailed in the briefing note tabled at the meeting. A copy of the briefing note is in the **Appendix**.

2. Referring to the definition of poverty quoted by SHW and the three main groups of the poor, namely, the unemployed, low-income families and elderly, Mr LEE Cheuk-

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yan enquired about the measures which would be adopted by the Administration to help the low-income families. He also wished to know whether the Administration's impending review on the Old Age Allowance was for the establishment of a means-testing mechanism so that the amount of assistance payable to the elderly people who had no financial means could be increased at the expense of those elderly people who were relatively well-off. Mr LEE said that this was most undesirable, as this would not only alter the objective of the Old Age Allowance which was to show the society's appreciation to the elderly, but would classify the elderly people into poor and rich categories. In his view, a better approach to help the elderly people with no financial means was to do away with some unfair requirements of the Comprehensive Social Security Scheme (CSSA), such as requiring elderly people living with their families to apply for CSSA on a household basis from last year. Mr LEE pointed out that although some elderly people lived with their families, it did not necessarily mean that they would be taken care of financially. Mr LEE further said that consideration should be given to extending CSSA to cover those elderly people whose assets just barely exceeded the eligibility limit.

3. SHW responded that giving out money and establishing a minimum wage system were not the most effective ways to help low-income families. Overseas experience and practice had shown that statutory minimum wage had only a minor effect in reducing poverty. In the Administration's view, the best approach was to tackle the problem at source by holistic and integrated social and economic policies. Hence, the best solution to assist the socially vulnerable individuals was by providing them with education, training and retraining opportunities so that they could possess the necessary skills and qualifications for job openings in the new economy. SHW pointed out that with the economy recovering and with the creation of 15 000 new jobs by the Administration over the next two years, the financial situation of many low-income families should be improved.

4. SHW further said that the Chief Executive had asked him to complete the Old Age Allowance review in the next 12 months. The purpose of the review was to provide additional assistance to a group of Old Age Allowance recipients who was in greater financial need. At present, the Old Age Allowance had a very high take-up rate. It was clear that some recipients were receiving adequate financial support from their families and regarded the Old Age Allowance as an extra source of income. However, a recent survey had shown that some Old Age Allowance recipients had very limited alternative sources of income and relied heavily on the Old Age Allowance as the main source of income. Instead of increasing the Old Age Allowance across the board, the Administration would find a way to target assistance to this latter group of people. SHW clarified that it was a long established policy to require all CSSA applicants to apply on a household basis. Requiring persons who were living with family members to apply for CSSA on a household basis encouraged mutual support within a family, and ensured equity and fairness to all families. Moreover, it prevented people from abusing the welfare system by singling out any economically unproductive members, who might be old, sick, disabled or unemployed, to apply for CSSA on their

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own, thus shifting the responsibility of supporting their family members to other taxpayers. On the suggestion of extending CSSA to cover those elderly people whose assets just barely exceeded the financial eligibility limit for CSSA, SHW said that another way to help them was to strengthen the family as a unit and to develop caring inter-personal relationships.

5. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan requested that the results of the survey on Old Age Allowance recipients be provided to members. SHW responded that such information would be supplied to members when the review on the Old Age Allowance was raised for discussion at the Panel.

6. Miss Cyd HO expressed disappointment that no mention was made in the policy programme to help women to solve the problem of poverty, having regard to the fact that women were very vulnerable to fall into poverty. According to the Policy Objective booklet entitled "Promote the well-being and interests of women", the Women's Commission would serve as a central body for the identification of all women's needs and specifically, to address all matters of concern to women. However, it was mentioned on page 8 of the English version of the booklet that the Administration would only consult the Women's Commission on various initiatives to facilitate women to participate more fully in the community. In the light of this, Miss HO enquired whether the role of the Women's Commission was a consultative one, or whether it had the power to raise issues for discussion, formulate policies and put forward proposals, such as requesting the Department of Justice to amend the legislation so as to remove the restrictions on women participating in public affairs under the functional constituency election system and the setting up of a alimony management board.

7. SHW responded that the reason why women were not singled out in the policy programme for helping the poor and the needy was because they were already covered in the socially disadvantaged groups mentioned by the Chief Executive in his Policy Address. He further said that measures to address women's needs and concerns would be considered by the Women's Commission to be set up shortly. SHW said that similar to the Elderly Commission and other like committees, the Women's Commission could take the initiative to raise issues for discussion and put forward proposals. Such proposals would however need to go through the established vetting procedures within the Administration.

8. Mr Henry WU enquired whether the Administration would consider matching the contributions made by the business sector to sponsor social welfare services run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary agencies. Alternatively, whether it would consider contributing a certain percentage of the total cost of a particular service, say, 60% by the Administration, with the remaining 40% to be borne by the business sector. Mr WU pointed out that without the financial backing from the Administration, many meaningful social welfare services run by NGOs and voluntary agencies would not be viable.

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9. SHW welcomed the business sector's active role in serving the community and in voluntary services. A review would be conducted in the coming year to examine ways on enhancing the working partnership between the Administration and the business sector in this regard. As regards Mr WU's questions, SHW said that the Administration would usually provide partial funding at the early implementation stage of a particular social welfare service. Full recurrent funding would be allocated to the NGOs concerned if the service had proven to meet the needs of the community. Director of Social Welfare (DSW) supplemented that apart from recurrent Government subventions of social welfare services provided by NGOs, the Lotteries Fund provided a ready source to financially support worthwhile and innovative projects on a time-limited basis. If the experimental service should prove to meet the needs of the community and financial resources permitting, full recurrent funding would be provided to the NGO. There were also occasions when a self-financing service run by a NGO had proven to meet the needs of the community, full recurrent Government funding would be sought to finance that services on an ongoing basis. A case in point was the introduction for the first time 6 000 subsidized places under after school care services in children and youth centres this year.

10. Mr WONG Sing-chi said that although one of the policy objectives was to increase the supply of quality residential care places under a mixed mode of service provision with more private sector participation, nothing was mentioned about the time required for admission into the residential care homes. Mr WONG further said that although huge resources had been put in to raise the standards of residential care homes run by the private sector, nothing was mentioned in the policy programme as to whether resources would be allocated to monitor the service delivered by the private care home operators.

11. SHW responded that apart from increasing the number of subsidized residential care places, another aspect of the policy programme would be to provide more resources to enable elderly people to continue to live at home. According to a survey conducted by the Administration, many frail elderly people preferred to live at home if they could receive adequate support and health care. To this end, the Administration would enhance day and community care services to the elderly people.

12. DSW supplemented that since the introduction of the residential care home for the elderly licensing scheme in 1996, tremendous efforts had been made to upgrade private homes. In order to obtain a licence, private care home operators had to comply with the provisions set out in the legislation which not only covered structural and fire safety but also staffing and other related operational requirements. To date, over 90% of the private care homes had been licensed. She was confident that no private care homes would be operating without a licence by March next year. After the licensing of private care homes had been completed, consideration would be given to examine ways on how to raise the quality of service delivered by the licensed homes. On the monitoring of the quality of service delivered by private care homes, DSW said

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that the Administration would follow-up complaints received from elderly people or the public irrespective of whether the private care homes in question were under the Bought Place Scheme.

13. DSW further said that in the past three years, an additional 6 400 subsidized residential care places had been provided, reducing the waiting time by eight months. It was envisaged that the waiting time would be further shortened in the coming 18 to 24 months, having regard to the fact that 1 600 more places would be provided in the next financial year and that 1 800 places would also be coming on stream before the end of the current financial year. In view of the expansion in the number of subsidized residential care places during the past few years, it was an opportune time to consider other options to care for the elderly people. As many frail elderly people preferred to live at home, enhanced home/community care services to the elderly suffering physical or cognitive impairments would be provided so that they could continue to live at home. The Administration would invite NGOs to provide such services next month. In terms of the cost for providing home care services to the elderly people, \$64 million had been allocated for the current financial year. Following the Policy Address 2000 by Chief Executive, an additional \$140 million had been allocated to providing home care services to the elderly people. As such, the total annual recurrent resources available for providing home care services to the elderly people had now increased to \$204 million.

14. Miss LI Fung-ying enquired whether the Administration had any measures to help the CSSA recipients to overcome poverty. She said that one of the reasons why some CSSA recipients did not have the incentive to work was because the money they could earn was less than their CSSA payment or about the same.

15. SHW responded that in order to encourage CSSA recipients to look for employment, CSSA recipients would enjoy disregarded earning up to \$1,805 a month. In addition, the first month's income on finding a job would be totally disregarded. Moreover, CSSA recipients could seek counselling and support, such as childminding, from the Social Welfare Department and enroll in the training and retraining courses offered by the Education and Manpower Bureau.

16. Noting that quality of life instead of poverty line was used as the basis for formulation of provision of welfare services, Mr Michael MAK enquired how quality of life was assessed in such formulation. SHW responded that there was no exact definition of what quality of life was as it varied from place to place. For Hong Kong, the Administration would provide immediate relief through a range of social services focusing on the six groups of socially disadvantaged people as set out in his briefing note. Tangible assistance in respect of housing, medical care, education and rehabilitation would also be offered to them. SHW reiterated that the best solution to tackle the problem of poverty was to address the problem at source by providing more opportunities for education and ensuring sustained healthy economic development.

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17. Miss CHAN Yuen-yan pointed out that regardless of how robust the economy was, there would still be a small number of socially disadvantaged people unable to secure employment. In this connection, Miss CHAN would like to know what measures could be taken to help these people.

18. SHW responded that apart from promoting economic growth, the other two inter-related approaches to tackle poverty minimization were through human development and social investment. Government Economist supplemented that although a robust economy would create many job opportunities, full employment would not be realized unless people had the necessary skills to perform the jobs. The problem of mismatch between the skills and capabilities required had long existed in Hong Kong. It had become more serious in recent years due to economic restructuring leading to insufficient job opportunities at the lower level and wage adjustment. As mentioned by SHW earlier, the best way to minimize the problem of mismatch between the skills and capabilities required was by providing the unemployed and low-income people with education, training and retraining so that they could possess the necessary skills and qualifications for the new economy. If, in the end, some people still could not re-enter the labour market, the existing social security net would help them to meet their basic needs.

19. Miss CHAN Yuen-han further enquired whether the Administration would consider creating more job opportunities in recycling of usable waste as part of the Administration's environmental and conservation initiatives. Secretary for Education and Manpower responded that local people were generally not interested in entry-level jobs in waste recovery and recycling, and people from the Mainland had to be recruited to fill the vacant posts. She further said that in deciding which types of jobs to be created, regard must be made to whether people had the necessary skills to meet the job requirements as well as the aspiration of people for their jobs.

II. Date of next meeting

20. The Chairman reminded members that the next meeting of the Panel would be held on Monday, 13 November 2000 at 10:45 am in the Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building.

21. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 11:24 am.