

立法會 *Legislative Council*

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Report of the Panel on Welfare Services for submission to the Legislative Council

Purpose

This report gives an account of the work of the Panel on Welfare Services during the 2001-2002 Legislative Council (LegCo) session. It will be tabled at the Council meeting on 3 July 2002 in accordance with Rule 77(14) of the Rules of Procedure.

The Panel

2. The Panel was formed by a resolution of this Council on 8 July 1998 and as amended on 20 December 2000 for the purpose of monitoring and examining Government policies and issues of public concern relating to welfare services matters.
3. The terms of reference of the Panel are in **Appendix I**.
4. The Panel comprises 14 members, with Hon CHAN Yuen-han and Hon LAW Chi-king elected as Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Panel respectively. The membership list of the Panel is in **Appendix II**.

Major work

Measures to address poverty

5. At the beginning of the session, the Panel discussed measures to address poverty with the Administration and representatives from the welfare sector.
6. The Administration pointed out that the Government had put in place a wide range of policies and measures to address poverty through multi-pronged approaches. The non-contributory social security system had been providing a safety net for the socially vulnerable to meet their basic and special needs through the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) and the Social

Security Allowance Schemes. To promote self-reliance among CSSA recipients, the Support for Self-reliance Scheme was introduced in June 1999 to help unemployed CSSA recipients to find work and go off CSSA. As regards employment, the Task Force on Employment tackled the problem of unemployment through various measures including accelerating public works and infrastructure projects, strengthening employment services, enhancing vocational training and employees retraining, promoting continuing education and combating illegal employment. The Government was also committed to providing public rental housing to families in genuine need and who could not afford accommodation of other types.

7. Most members shared the view that the various measures taken by the Administration to tackle poverty had not been effective in ameliorating the problem. Members were particularly concerned about the widening disparity between the poor and rich revealed in the results of the 2001 Population Census.

8. The Administration explained that amidst the economic downturn and on-going economic restructuring towards knowledge-based activities, there was likely to be a continued shift in labour demand in favour of higher-skilled and better educated workers in the coming years. In view of this, it seemed rather unlikely that the income disparity in Hong Kong would narrow in the near term. However, the Government had taken measures to address the mismatch between job requirements and qualifications. Notably, a \$5 billion Continuing Education Fund would be launched in 2002-03 to help people pursue continuing education to acquire the necessary skills to meet the manpower requirements of a knowledge-based economy. In addition, the Government had allocated \$400 million to launch the "Skills Upgrading Scheme" to provide focused skills training for in-service workers with secondary or lower education levels.

9. As the causes of poverty were complicated and inter-related, the Panel passed a motion urging the Administration to set up an inter-departmental "Combat Poverty Committee" to conduct studies on the issue of poverty and propose alleviating measures.

Community Investment and Inclusion Fund

10. The Administration briefed the Panel in January 2002 on the background and objectives of the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund and sought members' advice on the proposed allocation of \$300 million from General Revenue for the establishment of the Fund. Six community/social welfare organisations were invited by the Panel to give their views.

11. Members noted that the idea of setting up the Fund to promote mutual care, develop a community network and encourage community participation

was originally proposed by the social welfare sector. The prime objective of the Fund was to provide the resources and a vehicle to promote community participation in supporting individuals and families, especially the more vulnerable.

12. Members noted that the Administration envisaged that the Fund would primarily support community projects and cross-sector programmes that were likely to be sustainable in the longer term, preferably on a self-financing basis. A Fund committee would be set up to handle applications under the Fund and to advise on the development of social capital in Hong Kong. Members were concerned that the eligibility criteria proposed by the Administration might be very difficult for applicants to meet.

13. The Administration explained that the proposed eligibility criteria represented the Administration's initial thinking only. They would need to be discussed and approved by the Fund committee which would refine them as it gained more experience in vetting applications. Members were also concerned about the self-financing requirement and shared the view that people of little means or on public assistance should be remunerated for working for projects supported by the Fund. The Administration explained that the question of remuneration depended on the details of each application and would be for the Fund committee to decide.

14. Following discussion, members agreed that the Fund should be set up as soon as possible in order that the Fund committee could come up with a set of more clearly defined eligibility criteria in the light of experience gained in vetting applications. Members noted that the Administration would be in a position to respond to the views expressed at the meeting one year after the start of the Fund.

New initiatives to strengthen support for families

15. The Panel visited an Integrated Family Service Centre (IFSC) in Tin Shui Wai in April 2002 and met with single-parent service users during the visit to understand their needs and concerns. The IFSC, a new service delivery mode recommended by the consultancy study commissioned by the Administration to review family services, integrated family welfare services with district-based services to provide a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services to meet the changing needs of families in a holistic manner. Members noted that 10 to 15 pilot projects were being identified to test the effectiveness of the new service delivery model and the Tin Shui Wai IFSC, housed in a shopping mall, was the first one in operation.

16. During the visit, members were briefed on the new initiatives to strengthen support for families. Members noted that issues such as rising unemployment, job instability, negative property equity, together with

weakening of family solidarity and marriages, had resulted in an increase of family tragedies, domestic violence and youth problems. In order to meet the changing welfare needs of families in Hong Kong and those who were in vulnerable circumstances, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) had conducted reviews of existing services and adopted a three-pronged strategy in its re-engineering endeavours.

17. Apart from introducing a new service delivery model in the form of a IFSC as outlined in paragraph 15 above, a Family Support Networking Team had been set up in each SWD district to provide outreach and networking services to vulnerable families for early identification of problems and timely intervention. A Family Crisis Support Centre would be set up to help families overcome difficulties and prevent family problems from deteriorating into tragedy. In addition, a Suicidal Crisis Centre would be set up on a three-year pilot basis to provide round-the-clock outreaching service and crisis intervention/intensive counselling to those who were in crisis situation and at high suicidal risk.

18. As housing was one of the main concerns of single-parent service users, members urged that sympathetic consideration should be given to their applications for public housing units in the same estate as their close relatives. Approval of their applications would enable them to have more support from their mothers or sisters in childcare and other areas, which would in turn enable them to seek employment instead of relying on CSSA.

Strategy and measures to prevent and tackle family violence

19. In the wake of a number of family tragedies, the Panel discussed strategy and measures to prevent and tackle family violence with the Administration and four family welfare organisations. Members shared the concern of these organisations that the Police often treated family violence as an internal dispute within the family without making referral to SWD for timely intervention. The Police explained that they were constrained by the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance and in normal circumstances, the Police would have to respect the rights of the persons concerned if they did not give consent to referral. Nevertheless, the Police would try their best to persuade them to receive professional assistance.

20. Hon LAW Chi-kwong pointed out that section 59 of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance provided that disclosure of personal data could be exempted from the provisions of data protection principles if the non-disclosure of such would cause serious harm to the physical or mental health of the data subject. Therefore the Police should be able to refer domestic violence cases to SWD for follow-up even if the victim or abuser did not give consent to such referral. The Police agreed to review and seek further legal advice on the issue.

21. Members noted that the Subcommittee on Guardianship and Custody of the Law Reform Commission would finalise its proposals on guardianship and custody of children later in the year. Members hoped that through encouraging a less derisive approach, family tragedies arising from disputes concerning parental rights could be minimised. Members were also concerned about the difficulties encountered by battered women in securing a separate housing unit from the Housing Department and the matter had been referred to the Panel for Housing for follow-up action.

22. Members noted that to further enhance inter-departmental co-ordination in tackling the problem, a Task Force on Family Violence was set up and met in March 2002 and a four-pronged, multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral strategy had been put in place. Efforts would be stepped up in a number of areas, including adopting an evidence-based approach in preventive and intervention work; enhancing service interface and co-ordination; strengthening family and social support; and considering service reviews.

Elderly suicide and support for vulnerable elders

23. The Panel was briefed on the major findings and recommendations of "A Multi-Disciplinary Study on the Causes of Elderly Suicide in Hong Kong" commissioned by the Administration and the strategies and programmes adopted by the Administration to provide support for vulnerable elders. Members noted that the vulnerability of elders to abuse and suicide could be reduced by encouraging them to remain active and productive and enabling them to continue to contribute to the society, community and family. Raising public awareness, improving the image of ageing, and promoting respect and dignity for older persons were also important strategies.

24. As recommended by the Study, the Census and Statistics Department had already streamlined the updating of suicide statistics, with a view to ensuring the timely availability of suicide data. As for preventive strategies on elderly suicide, members noted that many of the Study's recommendations had already been taken on board in a wide range of services. Members noted that Hong Kong's elderly suicide rates had been on a decreasing trend since 1997, and remained stable in 2000, despite an increase in the overall suicide rates. The stable trend could be attributed to the Government's commitment to invest more funding in elderly services, an increase in the number of volunteers participating in the work of prevention of elderly suicide, and the support of researched-based information.

25. Members noted that the Administration had adopted various programmes and services that aimed at strengthening the protective factors and reducing the risk factors associated with elders' vulnerability to abuse and suicide. The Healthy Ageing Campaign launched by the Elderly Commission

in late 2000 aimed to arouse a greater sense of awareness on the importance of healthy ageing. The Elderly Health Centres and Visiting Health Teams of the Department of Health (DH) conducted regular education programmes on mental health for elders. DH also provided care programmes focusing on increasing awareness and improving techniques in dealing with older persons with suicidal intent or signs of depression. To tackle the problem of elderly suicide from a mental health perspective, the Hospital Authority would launch an Elderly Suicide Prevention Programme in October 2002 to enhance early detection and treatment of depression in elders, and provide intensive follow-up services through its fast track clinics to identified elders.

26. Members noted that the Administration had not yet completed its study on financial support for older persons as many complex issues were involved. As financial independence was important to vulnerable elders, some members urged the Administration to relax the requirement that applications for CSSA had to be made on a family basis in order to allow elders to make independent applications.

Initiatives to strengthen youth welfare services

27. Members noted that with the full co-operation of the welfare sector, the education sector and the Police, the Administration implemented the Understanding the Adolescent Project (UAP) in 150 schools in the 2001-02 school year for early identification of developmental needs of students and early intervention. The UAP was extended to primary schools on a pilot basis starting from the 2001-02 school year. It would be extended to another 104 secondary schools in 2002-03 and to a further 163 existing schools in the 2003-04 school year.

28. SWD would speed up the formation of integrated teams by phases and restructure existing outreaching social work teams with a view to achieving a full spectrum of services to meet the needs of youth in general as well as youth-at-risk. In addition, a programme of peer counsellors had been introduced to provide support and guidance to young people, particularly youth-at-risk. To ensure fuller coverage to deal with the increasing number of young drug abusers, two additional counselling centres for young psychotropic substance abusers would be set up in the East Kowloon and Hong Kong Regions. In addition to the provision of two Crisis Residential Centres as back-up shelter for young night drifters, an all-night drop-in centre for youth-at-risk would be set up in Kwun Tong to provide overnight centre-based services as well as a temporary shelter or crisis house for youth-at-risk.

29. Members expressed concern whether the provision of only one all-night drop-in centre in Kwun Tong would be able to meet the needs of young night drifters throughout the territory. The Administration explained that as the 18 outreach social work teams tasked to provide services for young night drifters

were each provided with a van, there should be no problem in bringing young people to the drop-in centre. Resources permitting and subject to availability of suitable premises, the Administration would consider setting up a similar centre in the North District which had the highest number of young night drifters.

Action plan on street sleepers

30. In June 2002, the Administration briefed the Panel on the progress of the implementation of the three year-action plan to help street sleepers since the last discussion by the Panel on the issue on 9 April 2001. The Administration pointed out that the action plan launched by three Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) commissioned by SWD which aimed to prevent the street sleepers from relapsing into street sleeping was implemented in view of the rising number of street sleepers, particularly the young and able-bodied persons. The project adopted an integrated approach, including counselling, arrangement for accommodation, advice on employment and arrangement of job placement, and provision of emergency fund.

31. Members noted that there had been a decrease in the number of street sleepers since the implementation of the action plan. However, members considered that early intervention measures should be taken to prevent the young and the able-bodied persons from street sleeping and urged the Administration to strengthen the interface among departments to solve the problem. In this regard, members noted that the Administration would broadly publicize preventive measures, such as the provisions of hostel services run by NGOs and assistance provided for the unemployed.

32. In response to members' concern about the problem of the street sleepers who were drug abusers, the Administration pointed out that the problem would be tackled at the district level by SWD District Offices and it would ensure that ex-offenders, drug abusers, and the mentally ill discharged from prisons, rehabilitation centres and hospitals would be provided with accommodation. Members noted that the Administration would review its provision of support services to street sleepers, taking into consideration the assessment of the overall result of the three-year action plan to be completed in March 2004.

Other issues/items discussed

33. Other issues/items discussed by the Panel included implications of the 2001 population census on the provision of social welfare services, provision of residential care services for elders and medical social services, and review on Integrated Neighbourhood Projects in targetted old urban areas. The Panel was consulted on the "Ending Exclusion" project for single parents, implementation of Phase II of the Information Systems Strategy of SWD and

conversion of Fanling Hospital into a rehabilitation complex before funding approval was sought from the LegCo Finance Committee.

34. The Panel held a total of nine meetings from October 2001 to June 2002, and paid a visit to the Tin Shui Wai IFSC.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
2 July 2002

**Legislative Council
Panel on Welfare Services**

Terms of Reference

1. To monitor and examine Government policies and issues of public concern relating to welfare and rehabilitation services matters.
2. To provide a forum for the exchange and dissemination of views on the above policy matters.
3. To receive briefings and to formulate views on any major legislative or financial proposals in respect of the above policy areas prior to their formal introduction to the Council or Finance Committee.
4. To monitor and examine, to the extent it considers necessary, the above policy matters referred to it by a member of the Panel or by the House Committee.
5. To make reports to the Council or to the House Committee as required by the Rules of Procedure.

**Legislative Council
Panel on Welfare Services**

Membership list

Chairman	Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP
Deputy Chairman	Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP
Members	Hon David CHU Yu-lin, JP Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan Hon LEE Cheuk-yan Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP Hon Bernard CHAN Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP Dr Hon YEUNG Sum Hon CHOY So-yuk Hon LI Fung-ying, JP Hon Henry WU King-cheong, BBS Hon WONG Sing-chi Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee
	(Total : 14 Members)
Clerk	Ms Doris CHAN
Legal Adviser	Mr LEE Yu-sung
Date	12 October 2001