

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)855/04-05
(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

Panel on Welfare Services

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Thursday, 20 January 2005 at 8:30 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

- Members present** : Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP (Chairman)
Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung (Deputy Chairman)
Hon James TIEN Pei-chun, GBS, JP
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Hon Bernard CHAN, JP
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, BBS, JP
Hon Albert CHAN Wai-yip
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Hon Albert Jinghan CHENG
- Members absent** : Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, JP
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung
- Member attending** : Hon WONG Kwok-hing, MH
- Public Officers attending** : Dr York Y N CHOW, SBS, JP
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

Mrs Carrie YAU, JP
Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

Ms Linda LAI, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Family and Women)

Ms Salina YAN
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Elderly Services and Social Security)

Mr Paul TANG, JP
Director of Social Welfare

Mr Freely CHENG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Family)

Clerk in attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Miss Mary SO
Senior Council Secretary (2) 8

I. Policy initiatives of Health, Welfare and Food Bureau for 2005
(LC Paper No. CB(2)659/04-05(01))

At the invitation of the Chairman, Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) took members through the Administration's paper which detailed the initiatives affecting the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) in the Chief Executive (CE) 2005 Policy Address and Policy Agenda.

Permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong for the Old Age Allowance

2. Mr WONG Kwok-hing noted that in order to provide elders with more flexibility to spend more time with family and friends outside Hong Kong, the Administration intended to relax the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong for the Old Age Allowance (OAA) and Disability Allowance under the Social Security Assistance (SSA) Scheme from 180 days to 240 days a year.

Mr WONG further noted that the Administration intended to implement the SSA proposal towards the end of 2005. Mr WONG was of the view that if the Administration truly practised what it said about creating a caring society, it should extend the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong for the OAA from 240 days a year to 360 days a year and implement it expeditiously.

3. SHWF responded that the OAA, which was non-means tested for elders aged 70 and above, was intended to serve elderly Hong Kong residents aged 65 and above in light of old age. At present, only about 56% of the elders in the population age group aged 65 and above were recipients of the OAA, while about 20% were recipients of CSSA. In view of the additional amount to be incurred from the relaxation of the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong for the OAA, the Administration had therefore decided to take this course forward in a cautious manner by raising the limit from the existing six months to eight months to see what the financial implication was. The Administration was concerned that if the permissible limit of absence for the OAA was overly relaxed, say, up to one year, it would greatly increase the Government's financial burden as any eligible elders who had emigrated to other places could apply for the OAA when they visited Hong Kong. SHWF hoped that the public at large would not view the OAA as financial assistance for the elderly to support their livelihood. In the Administration's view, people who had the means to support their elderly family members should do so and should not pass on such responsibility to the Government. The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme however stood ready to help those elderly who could not support themselves nor had anyone to support them.

4. As to the reason for implementing the SSA proposal towards the end of 2005, SHWF explained that this was because some time was needed to revise the associated computer programme to tie in with the new arrangements. SHWF, however, assured members that the Administration would not drag its feet in implementing the proposal and would try to expedite the associated computer programme as far as possible.

5. Mr WONG Kwok-hing asked about the additional cost to be incurred if the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong for the OAA was changed from 240 days a year to 360 days a year.

6. SHWF responded that the additional cost to the SSA Scheme could be in the region of several to over ten millions a year if the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong for the OAA were changed from 240 to 360 days a year as more eligible applicants might join the Scheme.

Measures to support independent living of disabled CSSA recipients

7. Mr WONG Kwok-hing criticised the Administration's proposal to provide those CSSA recipients who were 100% disabled or requiring constant attendance with enhanced financial assistance of an additional monthly supplement of \$100 to support them to live in the community was too meagre, and urged that this be further enhanced. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan echoed similar views.

8. SHWF responded that about 40 000 to 50 000 CSSA recipients were estimated to be eligible for the additional monthly supplement of \$100 for people who had 100% disability. If such an enhancement was implemented, the additional cost to the CSSA Scheme would amount to about \$60 million a year. In view of the tight fiscal situation, it was incumbent upon the Administration to strike a right balance in helping the needy.

Efficiency savings

9. Referring to paragraphs 4 and 37 of the Administration's paper, Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that the Administration should refrain from saying how much the social security portion of the welfare budget of the Government had taken up Hong Kong's salaries tax income, in order to avoid further polarising the community. Dr CHEUNG further said that although there had been an increase of 27.5% in the non-social security portion of the welfare budget of the Government over the past five years, it should be pointed out that subvented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had been asked to "do more with less" through such means as in-situ expansion and service rationalisation to achieve savings over the same period. In 2005-06, an across-the-board 1% cut to the subvented NGOs would be applied.

10. SHWF responded that in line with the Administration's effort to restore a balanced budget by 2008-09, efficiency savings on welfare expenditure would need to be made in 2005-06. Although the target of efficiency savings of welfare expenditure under the Social Welfare Department (SWD)'s purview excluding CSSA and SSA was expected to be 2.1%, an across-the-board of only 1% savings for the subvented NGOs would be applied in recognition of their concerns. Four items, i.e. provident fund payable on actual basis for NGO "snapshot" staff, rent and rate reimbursement, foster parent allowance and incentive payment for sheltered workers, would be exempted from efficiency savings in 2005-06. Moreover, about 70 NGOs, with recurrent annual subventions less than \$3 million after deducting the four exempted items, would be exempted from efficiency savings in the 2005-06 exercise. Special consideration would be accorded to NGOs which had genuine financial difficulties. SHWF further said that HWFB would meet with the welfare sector in the coming months to exchange views on how the sector could achieve the target of achieving a further 5% savings from

2006-07 to 2008-09, taking into account the impact of the cessation of the tide-over grant in 2006-07 for NGOs operating on lump sum grant subvention.

Measures to alleviate poverty

11. Dr Fernando CHEUNG welcomed the various new initiatives to reduce inter-generational poverty. Dr CHEUNG however expressed concern about the lack of details about these initiatives, such as whether new resources would be allocated to implement them, apart from the fact that a recurrent amount of \$75 million had been earmarked to the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) to provide school-based after school learning and other support services for needy students. Referring to the Head-Start Programme to be introduced by the Administration to help children under five in poor families, Dr CHEUNG asked whether this programme was primarily focused on the health aspect of the children given that it would be operated in the Department of Health (DH)'s Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs) and the number of children who would benefit from this programme.

12. SHWF responded that the amount of money which would be needed to operate the new measures to reduce inter-generational poverty would be announced by the Financial Secretary (FS) in his upcoming Budget speech in March 2005. SHWF, however, advised that the amount of money that would be put in to launch and operate the aforesaid measures would exceed the amount of efficiency savings that would be achieved from the cut in welfare expenditure under SWD's purview excluding CSSA and SSA in 2005-06.

13. As regards the Head-Start Programme, SHWF said that although the programme would be operated in MCHCs, this did not mean that the programme would only focus on the health aspect of children aged zero-five years. The reason why MCHCs were chosen to operate the Head-Start Programme was because over 90% of the newborn babies at present used the services provided by these Centres. MCHCs therefore provided the most convenient point to identify children and their families which might require further attention. Moreover, MCHCs would be used as a platform to strengthen inter-sectoral collaboration among DH, Hospital Authority, SWD/NGOs and EMB at the district level, with a view to providing timely and prompt intervention in the form of counselling and psychosocial support. A collaborative service model involving a multi-professional team was being developed by the concerned departments/agencies. The initiative would entail early identification and management of mothers with post-natal depression, early referral and feedback system for pre-school children with physical, developmental and behavioural problems at kindergarten and childcare settings, as well as introduction of a structured screening process in MCHCs.

14. As to the amount of money involved to launch the Head-Start Programme, SHWF said that about \$10 million was estimated to be required to launch the programme on a trial basis in four selected communities. The bulk of the money would be used on staff. It was the Administration's intention to extend the programme to other MCHCs by phases across the territory after a review of the trial programme.

15. Dr Fernando CHEUNG noted the Administration's plan to earmark an additional amount of \$5 million each year to provide another 415 full fee-waiving places for low-income families, especially those with single parents, who required after school care service operated by NGOs in centres for primary pupils aged six to 12. Dr CHEUNG hoped that the Administration could play a more proactive role in encouraging the NGOs providing after school service to increase the flexibility of such service so as to better meet the needs of service users.

16. SHWF responded that it was the Administration's plan to strengthen the co-ordination and effectiveness of the support to families in the areas of welfare as well as healthcare services. Relevant stakeholders in the district, such as service users and providers, local leaders and representatives from the Government departments concerned, would be involved.

17. Mr Albert CHENG said that following the announcement by CE to set up a Committee to alleviate poverty and to implement a series of measures to address the problem, there had been many voices in the media belittling the poor and the needy. Mr CHENG called upon the public to be sympathetic to the plight of the disadvantaged. SHWF concurred with Mr CHENG. Mr CHENG said that there was no dispute that the Administration was sincere in helping the poor and the needy, but he hoped that SHWF would publicly refute the sarcastic remarks directed at the poor and the needy.

18. The Chairman expressed concern about the lack of measures to assist low-income earners in the 2005 Policy Address. The Chairman hoped that membership of the Commission to Alleviate Poverty, to be chaired by FS, would include representatives from the workers unions/associations.

19. SHWF responded that the Administration was willing to help those low-income earners facing financial difficulties. The main problem was that it was difficult to identify them if they did not come forward to seek assistance. Nevertheless, there were existing fee-waiving mechanisms in schools and public clinics/hospitals to help people with financial difficulties. SHWF further said that it was also one of the main functions of the Commission on Poverty to explore practical ways to assist those who suffered from poverty due to old age, disability or single-parent family, and those in low-income employment.

Sustainability of the welfare system

20. Ms LI Fung-ying asked about the measure(s) which would be taken by the Administration to ensure the sustainability of Hong Kong's welfare system, given that resources were finite.

21. SHWF responded that the Administration did not consider that providing cash assistance to the needy was the most effective way to help the needy. In line with the international trend, actions had been and would continue to focus on the "social investment" concept to strengthen the capacities and capabilities of individuals to foster self-help and mutual help through tripartite partnership among Government, the business sector and the third sector (i.e. groups which were non-government and non-business). The establishment of the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) in 2002 was one major initiative to promote paradigm shifts of using "social investment" concept and "capacity building" in helping the vulnerable groups.

Assistance to young people with disabilities

22. Ms LI Fung-ying said that the various measures to help disabled young people to gain employment, as set out in paragraph 24(a) of the Administration's paper, were worthy of support. Ms LI however expressed concern about the effectiveness of these measures, given the still high unemployment rate. To better help disabled young people to gain employment, Ms LI urged the Administration to take the lead in hiring this group of people.

23. SHWF responded that it was Government's policy to place people with disabilities in appropriate jobs wherever possible. This was consistent with Government's general policy to integrate people with disabilities into the community through the process of vocational rehabilitation and eventual gainful employment. Director of Social Welfare advised that an intensive employment project targeted at employment of disabled young people would be launched this year. Under the project, disabled young job seekers would be provided with vocational rehabilitation service including job training and counselling, job attachment, job trial and post-placement service. An allowance of \$1,250 per month would be given to the disabled young people for three months during the job attachment period.

24. Ms LI Fung-ying asked the Administration whether consideration would be given to requiring employers to hire a certain percentage of staff who were disabled persons. Alternatively, whether consideration would be given to providing incentives to employers, such as tax deduction, to hire disabled persons.

25. SHWF responded that overseas experience had shown that making it

mandatory for employers to hire a certain percentage of their staff who were disabled people had failed to integrate them in the job market. Many employers hired the disabled simply to fill quotas and did not give them real work to do. This practice would not only have the labelling effect on the disabled persons but would cause resentment among other staff. In his view, empowering the disabled and encouraging the employers to hire them was more practical and appropriate.

Regulation of the residential care homes for the elderly

26. Mr Albert CHAN expressed concern about the poor conditions and lack of privacy of some residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), and urged SWD to be more stringent when granting licences to the home operators. Mr CHAN further urged the Administration to expeditiously address the problem of home operators at risk of being sued by Incorporated Owners for breach of the Deed of Mutual Covenant (DMC), having regard to the fact that private buildings remained the major source for RCHE premises.

27. SHWF responded that there was always room for improvement in the conditions of RCHEs. However, due regard would need to be given to how much the home operators and service users could bear the costs if the licensing standards of RCHEs were raised. SHWF further said that he would look into the problem mentioned by Mr CHAN in paragraph 26 above concerning operation of RCHEs in premises subject to DMC, and see how the problem could be tackled in consultation with SWD and other relevant departments.

Adjustment of the CSSA monthly payment rates

28. Mr Fred LI said that the Administration should expeditiously adjust the CSSA monthly payment rates upwards in view of the inflationary situation, if it was serious in alleviating poverty.

29. SHWF assured members that the Administration would adjust the CSSA monthly payment rates upwards if there was a clear trend in the rise of the Social Security Assistance Index of Prices.

Engaging the business sector in developing social capital

30. Mr James TIEN said that apart from engaging big corporations in developing social capital, efforts should also be made to engage small and medium-sized firms in such endeavour. Mr TIEN further said that the Administration should explore more ways of awarding those small and medium-sized firms which had contributed their time and resources in the development of social capital.

Action

31. SHWF responded that the Administration did not only focus on engaging big corporations in the development of social capital. For instance, many collaborators and partners of projects funded by the CIIF were small establishments. SHWF also agreed that the Administration would consider ways to provide recognition and award to small and medium-sized firms which had contributed efforts in the development of social capital.
32. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 9:37 am.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
17 February 2005