

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)358/07-08
(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

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Panel on Welfare Services

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Monday, 15 October 2007, at 9:30 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

Members present : Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung (Chairman)
Hon CHAN Yuen-han, SBS, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon LI Fung-ying, BBS, JP
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, SBS, JP
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Dr Hon KWOK Ka-ki

Members absent : Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, GBS, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum, JP
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung

Members attending : Hon Emily LAU Wai-hing, JP
Hon WONG Kwok-hing, MH

Public Officers attending : Labour and Welfare Bureau

Mr Matthew CHEUNG Kin-chung, GBS, JP
Secretary for Labour and Welfare

Mr Paul TANG, JP
Permanent Secretary for Labour and Welfare

Ms Subrina CHOW
Administrative Assistant to Secretary for Labour and
Welfare

Mr Stephen FISHER, JP
Director of Social Welfare

Mr Allen LEUNG Yiu-fat, JP
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration) (Atg)

Mr FUNG Pak-yan
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services)

Home Affairs Bureau

Mr TSANG Tak-sing
Secretary for Home Affairs

Mr Donald TONG
Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs (1)

Miss Adeline WONG
Deputy Director of Home Affairs (1)

**Clerk in
attendance** : Miss Betty MA
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

**Staff in
attendance** : Mrs Vivian KAM
Assistant Secretary General 2

Mr Chris LAI
Senior Council Secretary (2) 7

Miss Maggie CHIU
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

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I. Briefing by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare and the Secretary for Home Affairs on the Chief Executive's Policy Address 2007-2008 [LC Paper Nos. CB(2)3/07-08(01) and (02)]

Secretary for Labour and Welfare (SLW) briefed members on the new welfare and poverty alleviation initiatives in the 2007-2008 Policy Address and

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Policy Agenda, and gave an account of the progress of work of the major initiatives relating to welfare services in the 2006-2007 Policy Agenda. SLW said that the major new initiatives included –

- (a) studying the long-term development planning for social welfare in Hong Kong through the Social Welfare Advisory Committee;
- (b) enhancing outreaching efforts of elderly centres to singleton and hidden elders and strengthening referral, counselling and support services for elders in need;
- (c) providing additional subsidised day care places and residential care places and enhancing community care services for the elderly;
- (d) allocating a one-off funding of \$200 million to help improve the homes of elderly people living in poor conditions;
- (e) strengthening services and support for persons with disabilities (PWDs) and their families/carers;
- (f) extending the Comprehensive Child Development Service in phases to enhance support for families and children in need;
- (g) intensifying direct support for victims of domestic violence and vulnerable families and launching a pilot child fatality review mechanism;
- (h) setting up a Task Force on Poverty to oversee poverty alleviation matters and follow up on the poverty alleviation recommendations put forth by the Commission on Poverty (CoP); and
- (i) establishing a \$300 million Child Development Fund to provide more development opportunities for children from a disadvantaged background.

2. Secretary for Home Affairs (SHA) introduced the Administration's new and on-going initiatives on family issues and the further development of social enterprise (SE). He said that a high-level Family Council would be set up before the end of 2007-2008 to advise the Government on the formulation of policies and strategies for supporting and strengthening the family and on the development of related programmes/activities, and would monitor their implementation. SHA added that the Administration would strive to provide an enabling environment to facilitate the further development of SE.

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(*Post-meeting note* : The speaking notes of SLW and SHA were issued to members vide LC Paper Nos. CB(2)84/07-08(01) and (02) respectively on 15 October 2007.)

Support services for families at risk

3. Referring to the Tin Shui Wai family tragedy on 14 October 2007, Mr WONG Kwok-hing expressed grave concern about the inadequacy of support services for families at risk. He said that according to media reports, incoming calls made to the Family Crisis Support Centre (FCSC) Hotline were sometimes unanswered and transferred to the voice mailbox. Mr WONG strongly urged the Administration to enhance the hotline service so that callers could receive immediate response and support. Expressing similar views, Ms LI Fung-ying said that additional resources should be provided to strengthen the manpower to man the FCSC Hotline, especially at night time when callers could hardly seek other forms of assistance.

4. SLW responded that the Social Welfare Department (SWD) had provided additional funding to FCSC to strengthen its Hotline manpower. However, when the lines were busy, the on-duty social workers would sometimes be unable to answer all the incoming calls immediately, and the callers would be requested to leave their messages in the voice mailbox. The social workers would check the voice mailbox and get back to them within about 20 minutes. SLW added that additional resources would be provided for the operation of the Hotline service. To facilitate the provision of immediate referral and support services by social workers of the Hotline service, the Administration would explore the feasibility of redirecting those calls on welfare service enquiries from SWD's Hotline to the "1823 Integrated Call Centre" of the Government.

5. Mr Albert HO said that the recurrence of family tragedies in Tin Shui Wai had indicated that family services in the district were far from adequate. He urged the Administration to review expeditiously and enhance the provision of support services for high risk families in the district, having regard to the special needs of these families. Expressing similar views, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan considered that additional resources should be allocated to strengthen the manpower of social workers so that the latter could follow up more closely on the high-risk cases in all districts.

6. SLW responded that after the Tin Shui Wai family tragedy in 2004, additional resources had been allocated for the provision of family services in the district, although there was still room for improvement. In order to prevent the recurrence of family tragedies, the Administration would review critically the existing manpower of family services, and step up its efforts to enhance support services for families at risk and promote community support taking into account the views from the relevant stakeholders. SLW added that the

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Administration would revert to the Panel on the review findings by the end of 2007.

7. Dr KWOK Ka-ki remained dissatisfied with the Administration's response. He said that the recurrence of family tragedies in Tin Shui Wai showed that the Administration had failed to provide adequate support services for high risk families in the district. He urged the Administration to consult the relevant stakeholders, including frontline social workers, on how the family services in the district could be further improved and strengthened.

Poverty alleviation

8. Mr WONG Kwok-hing expressed concern that many poor elders faced undue economic hardship and could only rely on the Old Age Allowance (OAA) under the Social Security Allowance (SSA) Scheme for a living. He said that the level of OAA was determined about 10 years ago and was outdated; it should be increased in the light of the current standard of living. Mr WONG urged the Administration to further relax the permissible annual absence limit from Hong Kong for OAA, and extend the Portable Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (PCSSA) Scheme to all provinces in the Mainland.

9. SLW explained that OAA payment, which was non-contributory and largely non-means-tested, was not meant to be an income support for the elderly. The Administration, however, maintained an open mind on how the payment of OAA could be further improved to help the needy ones.

10. Miss CHAN Yuen-han expressed disagreement with the Administration's understanding of OAA. She said that in the absence of a universal retirement protection scheme, needy elders not on CSSA had in fact relied on OAA to make ends meet. Miss CHAN urged the Administration to honour the former Chief Executive's pledge to increase the monthly OAA payment to \$1,000.

11. Echoing Miss CHAN's concern, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan and Mr Frederick FUNG said that some needy elders could not apply for CSSA because of the stringent eligibility criteria, notably the asset limit and the requirement for elders to apply for CSSA on a household basis. Mr LEE and Mr FUNG considered that the Administration should raise the level of OAA and relax the eligibility criteria for CSSA.

12. Miss CHAN Yuen-han considered that the poverty alleviation initiatives announced in the Policy Address were far from adequate to assist the poor and failed to meet the public expectation. She said that the Administration should adopt a holistic approach to address the problem of poverty, in place of the piecemeal poverty alleviation measures. To assist the working poor to move from welfare to self-reliance, Miss CHAN said that the pilot Transport Support

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Scheme (TSS) should be extended to low-income workers in all districts, if they had to commute long distance to work.

13. SLW responded that the Administration would conduct a review of the pilot TSS at the end of the one-year pilot. The Administration would study the way forward in the light of the operational experience of TSS and the views and suggestions from the Legislative Council and the community.

14. Ms LI Fung-ying expressed disappointment at the Administration's failure to take forward poverty alleviation recommendations put forth by CoP and the Subcommittee to Study the Subject of Combating Poverty. She enquired about the concrete measures, timetable, and the additional resources for taking forward these recommendations.

15. SLW responded that a Task Force on Poverty comprising representatives of relevant bureaux and departments had been set up and led by him to monitor the progress of implementing the CoP's recommendations. The Administration was studying how best to take forward some of the CoP's recommendations, such as providing a "one-stop" employment service through strengthening the collaboration among the Labour Department, SWD and the Employees Retraining Board, and setting up a Child Development Fund to provide more development opportunities for children from a disadvantaged background.

16. Ms Emily LAU expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of concrete measures in the Policy Address to assist the needy. She considered that in view of the improved fiscal position of the Government, the Administration should allocate more resources for poverty alleviation and providing assistance for the needy. Ms LAU was disappointed to learn that only some \$150 million would be allocated annually for implementation of a trial scheme to provide health care voucher for elders.

17. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan and Mr Frederick FUNG expressed disappointment that the Policy Address had not come up with concrete proposals for combating poverty. On the contrary, the Chief Executive had proposed tax relief measures which would aggravate the income disparity by benefiting the rich more than the poor.

18. Ms Emily LAU noted with concern that the household income disparity was widening, as evidenced by an increase in the number of households at both ends of income distribution between the years 1996 and 2006. She strongly requested the Administration to set a target to reduce the number of low-income households in Hong Kong.

19. SLW responded that as announced in the Policy Address, poverty alleviation was a priority for the Administration in the next five years. He said

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that while the CSSA Scheme would continue to provide a safety net of last resort for those in need, the Administration would step up its efforts to tackle the poverty problem by creating more job opportunities through major infrastructure projects and promoting self-reliance through strengthening the provision of work incentives, and training and retraining programmes.

20. Responding to Ms Emily LAU's enquiry, SHA said that the Government was determined and committed in tackling the poverty problem, and would make concerted efforts to alleviate the problem and foster a caring culture in Hong Kong.

21. Considering that the income disparity between the rich and the poor was becoming more serious, Mr Frederick FUNG took the view that CoP should be re-established and led by the Chief Secretary for the Administration (CS). The new commission should follow up on the implementation progress of the CoP's recommendations and formulate new poverty alleviation initiatives. Dr KWOK Ka-ki considered that the dissolution of CoP showed that the Administration lacked sincerity in tackling the problem of poverty.

22. SLW reiterated that the Task Force on Poverty would monitor the implementation of the CoP's recommendations. The Administration would study carefully the poverty alleviation initiatives put forth by CoP, and continue to listen to views from the relevant stakeholders when implementing these recommendations. SLW added that the Task Force would make progress reports to CS.

Elderly Services

23. Ms LI Fung-ying expressed concern about the provision of elderly services. She considered that the number of additional subsidised day care places and residential care places for elders as proposed in the Policy Address were inadequate to shorten the long waiting time for these services. Echoing Ms LI's views, Dr KWOK ka-ki urged the Administration to allocate more resources for implementing the trial scheme to provide integrated support for elderly hospital discharges who had difficulty in taking care of themselves.

24. SLW stressed that the Government attached great importance to the care for the elders, and promoted ageing in the community. He said that the Administration had put forth a number of recommendations to enhance the support for the elders. For instance, \$38 million had been earmarked in the 2007-2008 Budget for the elderly centres to increase their manpower to enhance their outreaching efforts to singleton and hidden elders. The Administration would also provide additional subsidised day care places and residential care places for the elderly. A trial scheme would be introduced to provide integrated support for elderly hospital discharges who had difficulty in taking care of

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themselves. The first pilot scheme would commence in Kwun Tong in early 2008. SLW further said that the Administration would continue to monitor the provision of subsidised elderly services having regard to the service needs and availability of resources.

Support services for persons with disabilities

25. Mr WONG Kwok-hing expressed disappointment at the Administration's failure to urge the public transport operators to provide concessionary fares for PWDs, despite members' repeated requests on different occasions. He strongly urged the Administration to take measures to introduce concessionary fares for PWDs without further delay.

26. SLW said that the Chief Executive had made it clear earlier that the Administration would need more time to study the proposals for provision of concessionary fares for PWDs, and more concrete details would be available within the coming months.

27. Mr Albert HO said that the female victim involved in the recent Tin Shui Wai family tragedy was reported to have a history of mental illness. He raised concern about the long waiting time for mental health services and rehabilitation services for discharged mental illness patients. Expressing similar views, Dr KWOK Ka-ki noted with concern the absence of new initiatives in the Policy Address to enhance rehabilitation services for mental illness patients.

28. SLW said that the Administration would continue to strengthen support and services to enhance the integration of PWDs, including the ex-mentally ill into the community. To this end, additional places for day training, vocational rehabilitation, pre-school and residential services for PWDs would be provided for meeting the growing service demands in the light of the availability of resources. SLW said that the Administration would convey members' concern about the long waiting time for medical appointments at the Hospital Authority's Psychiatric Out-patient Clinics to the Food and Health Bureau.

Child protection

29. Mr Albert HO said that children were usually the victims of domestic violence, as they were physically vulnerable and could not protect themselves. In the light of the recent Tin Shui Wai family tragedy, the Administration should draw up specific measures to enhance protection of children's rights and benefits.

30. SLW said that having regard to the importance of early intervention in protecting children at risk, the Administration planned to pilot a child fatality review mechanism to identify patterns and trends for formulation of prevention strategies, and promote multi-disciplinary cooperation in the prevention of child

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death. The review mechanism would commence operation in early 2008 and the way forward would be decided after the two-year pilot period.

Other issues of concern

Development of social enterprise

31. While expressing support for the further development of SE in Hong Kong, Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that the Government's support measures for the SE development were lagging behind those in some overseas countries, such as the United Kingdom. Citing the operational experience of some SE projects under the Enhancing Self-Reliance Through District Partnership Programme, she considered that the crux was the need to provide support for the sustained development of SE projects.

Proposed establishment of a Family Council

32. Mr Frederick FUNG considered that the Administration was on the right track to establish a Family Council to facilitate better coordination of cross-sectoral efforts on family matters. He was concerned, however, that the Administration had not paid much attention to the needs of single parent families.

33. In closing, the Chairman said that the recent Tin Shui Wai family tragedy showed that the Administration had not learnt from the family tragedy in 2004 and had failed to enhance the provision of welfare services for high-risk families in Tin Shui Wai. He said that the Administration should examine the problems critically and take appropriate measures having regard to the special needs of the residents in the district. The Chairman suggested that the Panel should hold a special meeting to discuss the provision of welfare services for high-risk families in Tin Shui Wai. Members agreed.

(Post-meeting note : The special meeting of the Panel would be held on 30 October 2007 at 10:45 am.)

II. Any other business

34. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 10:33 am.