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The Honourable Wong Sing-chi
Chairman
Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central Hong Kong

Consultation on the Long-term Social Welfare Planning

The Legislative Council (LegCo) Panel on Welfare Services (Panel) held a special meeting on 5 June 2010 inviting deputations to offer views and comments on a consultation paper entitled "Long-term Social Welfare Planning in Hong Kong" recently issued by the Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC). At the meeting, Panel Members and participants made a number of comments, including the criticism that SWAC was not well recognised by the welfare sector; the long-term social welfare planning exercise should be led by the Government rather than SWAC; the absence of representatives of the Administration at the deputation meeting held by the Panel and hence showing a lack of commitment and evasion of responsibility, etc. Given the misunderstanding involved, I see a need to clarify with the Panel, the sector and stakeholders and explain the Administration's position.

Establishment and composition of SWAC

Established in 1947, SWAC is one of the Government advisory bodies with a long history. Over the years, SWAC has been responsible for keeping social welfare services in Hong Kong under review and advising the Administration on policies on social welfare development

from a macro perspective. SWAC is currently headed by a non-official Chairman and comprises 21 non-official members from different background, including social welfare, education, business, professional and community sectors. The composition of SWAC is conducive to maintaining its independent operation and providing advice to the Administration in an impartial and objective manner.

The long-term social welfare planning study

The Administration has entrusted SWAC with the task of studying the long-term social welfare planning in Hong Kong. The Administration believes that, through the diverse background of its members, SWAC can analyse and study, at different levels and from various perspectives, the issues that are affecting the provision of welfare services in Hong Kong, and provide objective and unbiased recommendations to the Administration on the long-term social welfare development in Hong Kong.

The first consultation exercise

To kick off the study, SWAC wrote to more than 400 local welfare non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and relevant stakeholders (including subvented and non-subvented welfare NGOs, self-help and service user groups and organisations related to the social work profession) on 10 April 2008 inviting their views on a list of issues pertinent to the long-term development of social welfare in Hong Kong. As requested by the sector, the consultation period was extended from four months to six months until 30 September 2008. Nonetheless, respondents' views received during the first consultation exercise were diverse and could not provide a basis for conclusion. SWAC thus set up a Task Group on Welfare Planning (Task Group) last year to take forward the welfare planning study. The Task Group held a number of meetings to review and analyse a considerable amount of information and data relating to the population structure and changes, social development and provision of welfare services, etc. As an important step of the study, SWAC has, with the assistance of the Task Group, prepared a consultation paper and conducted a new round of more in-depth consultation exercise.

The second consultation exercise

SWAC issued a consultation paper in mid-April 2010 to consult the sector and stakeholders on the major issues and factors affecting the provision of welfare services, the mission and values of social welfare,

the guiding principles for social welfare planning and the strategic directions for planning and provision of welfare services as set out in the paper. Apart from the some 400 organisations approached during the first consultation exercise, the consultation paper was also sent to local universities and relevant research institutes, business / professional bodies and some welfare-related private funds and trusts inviting them to express their views and take part in the several consultation sessions organised by SWAC.

To ensure that members of the public and other parties can also participate in the consultation, SWAC has uploaded the consultation paper and details of the consultation sessions onto the internet for their reference. To listen to their views direct, SWAC welcomed relevant stakeholders and the general public to join the four consultation sessions held in May. Apart from the consultation sessions, SWAC also actively attended / would attend consultation meetings organised by other bodies including the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and the Hong Kong Social Workers Association.

The consultation paper is meant to consult, and solicit the views of, the welfare sector and stakeholders. It is not the final report of SWAC submitted to the Administration. Nor does SWAC have any preconceived stance at this stage. Upon completion of the consultation, SWAC would thoroughly study and analyse the views and comments received and prepare a report for consideration by the Administration.

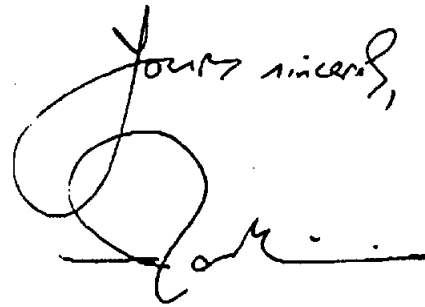
The Administration's position

To ensure that SWAC is able to conduct the long-term planning study in an objective, independent and comprehensive manner, listen to the views and response directly from various sectors, have sufficient room for considering and providing impartial recommendations, the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) has to respect the independence of SWAC and its arrangements for the consultation sessions. Hence, other than providing secretarial support services to SWAC, LWB has not arranged any official to attend the consultation sessions held by SWAC and its meetings with individual bodies, so as to avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding that the Administration is meddling or intervening in SWAC's study.

According to our understanding, the purpose of the special Panel meeting on 5 June was to gauge the views of the deputations on the consultation paper. We therefore adopted the same arrangement for the

SWAC Secretary to accompany the Chairman and members to attend the meeting to listen to the views of the participants. Let me stress that the Administration attaches great importance to the consultation and the views received. There is no question of our evading responsibility. The decision not to participate in the consultation exercise direct was based on the principle stated in the preceding paragraph that it is inappropriate for the Administration to get involved in the discussion of the consultation paper at this stage while the consultation is still underway. Upon completion of the consultation exercise and submission of the report by SWAC, the Administration will certainly study the recommendations in-depth and consult LegCo in due course.

I understand that the Panel on Welfare Services will hold another special meeting on 26 June to continue to listen to the views of other deputations on the long-term welfare planning. LWB will discuss with the SWAC Chairman and members and decide on the attendance list.

Yours sincerely,


(Matthew Cheung Kin-chung)
Secretary for Labour and Welfare

- c.c. Vice-Chairman and Members of the Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Clerk to the Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Chairman and Members of the Social Welfare Advisory Committee