

FACT SHEET

Provision of sign language service

1. Introduction

1.1 The Panel on Welfare Services will discuss the subject of provision of sign language service at its meeting on 10 July 2012. This fact sheet aims to provide information on the sign language service provided by the Government, and issues and concerns about the service.

2. Sign language service provided by the Government

2.1 According to the latest survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department on persons with disabilities and chronic diseases in 2006-2007¹, there were 92 200 persons with hearing difficulty in Hong Kong, accounting for 1.3% of the total population. Among those persons with hearing difficulty, 9.3% were unable to hear at all (8 600 persons), 25.9% required a specialized hearing aid in order to be able to hear well (23 900 persons), and 64.8% did not require a specialized hearing aid (59 700 persons).

2.2 At present, the Government provides a range of community support services for hearing impaired persons, including sign language interpretation services and training courses, through rehabilitation non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") under its subvention. These rehabilitation NGOs also provide sign language interpretation services to various government departments and related organizations to facilitate their communication with and effective delivery of services to hearing impaired persons. These include the Judiciary, the Hong Kong Police Force, the Correctional Services Department, the Immigration Department, the Social Welfare Department and the Hospital Authority.

¹ Census and Statistics Department (2008).

2.3 In addition, rehabilitation NGOs conduct sign language training for sign language interpreters, staff of Government departments and public organizations, and members of the public; publish training manuals on Hong Kong Sign Language; and organize publicity activities to promote the use of sign language.

2.4 To promote the wider use of sign language and enhance inclusion of hearing impaired persons, the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee ("RAC")² set up a working group in 2010 with a view to advising the Government on ways to promote the use of sign language. The working group comprises RAC members, hearing impaired persons, sign language interpreters, and representatives of rehabilitation NGOs, the education sector and relevant Government bureaux and departments.

3. Issues and concerns

Promoting the use of sign language

3.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ("the Convention")³ has entered into force for the People's Republic of China, including the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, since 31 August 2008. According to Article 21 of the Convention, States Parties have to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information by, among other measures, recognizing and promoting the use of sign language.

² RAC is the principal advisory body to the Government on matters pertaining to the well-being of persons with disabilities, and the development and implementation of rehabilitation policies and services in Hong Kong,

³ The purpose of the Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

3.2 The Government conducted a public consultation between February and March 2010 on the implementation of the Convention in respect of the proposed topics to be covered in the initial report to be submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ("the UN Committee")⁴. During the public consultation, some stakeholders suggested that the Government should further promote the use of sign language, such as by expanding the scope of provision of sign language interpretation service by Government departments, public bodies and business organizations for delivering services to hearing impaired persons.

3.3 In the initial report submitted to the UN Committee in 2010⁵, the Government stated that the Judiciary, Government departments and public organizations would arrange for sign language interpretation service where necessary to facilitate communication with hearing impaired persons. In this regard, the Labour and Welfare Bureau would urge the relevant Government bureaux and departments to review the policies and measures under their purview and promote accessible modes of communication, including the use of sign language. Besides, the working group under RAC would map out the strategic directions in promoting the use of sign language with a view to enhancing support for hearing impaired persons in their daily lives.

3.4 The report also acknowledged the concerns of some stakeholders about the inadequate provision of sign language training for hearing impaired persons and their suggestion for including sign language in the syllabus of special schools for children with hearing impairment. The Government indicated that the aim of education for children with hearing impairment was to prepare them to integrate and communicate with the hearing community. These children were encouraged to use their residual hearing to develop as much language as possible so that they could master adequate communication skills for everyday interaction with their hearing counterparts. The medium of instruction for special schools for children with hearing impairment was aural/oral, manual (which included signing) or total communication with due regard to the educational needs of students.

⁴ The Convention stipulates that each State Party shall submit to the UN Committee an initial report on measures taken to give effect to its obligations under the Convention within two years after the entry into force of the Convention for the State Party concerned.

⁵ The initial report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region was submitted to the UN Committee as part of the combined initial reports of the People's Republic of China.

3.5 In April 2012, the Public Complaints Office of the Legislative Council received a complaint from a social group representing the interests of elderly with hearing impairment. The complainant requested the Government, among other things, to motivate healthcare personnel and care workers in residential care homes and service centres for the elderly to learn sign language. This was to ensure that they could have better communication with and provide appropriate care and services to service users with hearing impairment.

3.6 In response to the above complaint, the Government replied that rehabilitation NGOs had been providing sign language interpretation and training services to enhance hearing impaired persons' communication with the hearing community. Besides, the working group under RAC had mapped out the strategies and work plan for promoting the use of sign language in Hong Kong. Specific activities under the work plan included: (a) providing sign language training to civil servants; (b) producing a television programme to promote sign language; and (c) working with the Hospital Authority to explore the feasibility of providing video relay service for sign language interpretation in public hospitals.

Standardization of sign language

3.7 At present, the sign language used by hearing impaired persons has different versions. Some stakeholders attribute the development of different versions of sign language to the lack of formal education of a standardized sign language among hearing impaired persons. These stakeholders consider that the Government should standardize the sign language used in Hong Kong and adopt standardized sign language as teaching aid in kindergartens for children with hearing impairment in order to promote a wider use of sign language.

3.8 In the latest Rehabilitation Programme Plan⁶ released in 2007 which set out the directions for the development of rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities, standardization of sign language was raised as an issue that needed to be further studied. The Government had indicated that the issue would be considered by RAC.

⁶ The 2007 Rehabilitation Programme Plan was compiled by the Rehabilitation Programme Plan Review Working Group and endorsed by RAC. The Working Group was chaired by the Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, and comprised representatives of RAC, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, rehabilitation NGOs, persons with disabilities, self-help groups and relevant public authorities.

References

1. 2005-2007 Rehabilitation Programme Plan Review Working Group. (2007) *Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan*. Available from: http://www.lwb.gov.hk/eng/advisory/rac/rpp_report.htm [Accessed July 2012].
2. Census and Statistics Department. (2008) *Special Topics Report No. 48 – Persons with disabilities and chronic diseases*. Available from: http://www.statistics.gov.hk/publication/stat_report/social_data/B11301482008XXXXB0100.pdf [Accessed July 2012].
3. Labour and Welfare Bureau. (2011) *Replies to initial written questions raised by Finance Committee Members in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2011-12 – Reply Serial No. LWB(WW)026*. Available from: http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr10-11/english/fc/fc/w_q/lwb-ww-e.pdf [Accessed July 2012].
4. *Minutes of Meeting of the Panel on Constitutional Affairs of the Legislative Council*. (2010) 19 March. LC Paper No. CB(2)2119/09-10.
5. Social Welfare Department. (2004) *Handbook on Rehabilitation Services*. Available from: <http://www.swd.gov.hk/doc/downsecdoc/handbook.pdf> [Accessed July 2012].
6. Social Welfare Department. (2011) *Services for Hearing Impaired Persons*. Available from: http://www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/site_pubsvc/page_rehab/sub_listofserv/id_serhearimp/ [Accessed July 2012].
7. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (2010) *Initial Report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Available from: [http://www.lwb.gov.hk/UNCRPD/Publications/HKSAR's%20UNCRPD%20report_Eng%20\(version%20for%20publication\).pdf](http://www.lwb.gov.hk/UNCRPD/Publications/HKSAR's%20UNCRPD%20report_Eng%20(version%20for%20publication).pdf) [Accessed July 2012].

8. 立法會秘書處：《要求政府設立聾人安老院舍及推動醫護人員和照顧員學習手語》，2012年，立法會CB(2)2209/11-12(01)號文件。
9. 勞工及福利局：《新聞公報：勞工及福利局局長國際復康日開幕典禮暨十八區關愛僱主嘉許禮致辭》，2011年，網址：<http://www.lwb.gov.hk/chi/speech/03122011.htm> [於2012年7月登入]。

Research Division
6 July 2012
Tel: 3919 3636

Fact sheets are compiled for Members and Committees of the Legislative Council. They are not legal or other professional advice and shall not be relied on as such. Fact sheets are subject to copyright owned by the Legislative Council Commission (the Commission). The Commission permits accurate reproduction of fact sheets for non-commercial use in a manner not adversely affecting the Legislative Council, provided that acknowledgement is made stating the Research Division of the Legislative Council Secretariat as the source and one copy of the reproduction is sent to the Legislative Council Library.