For discussion on
9 March 2015

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Promoting Active Ageing

Purpose

      This paper reports to Members on the progress of various initiatives of the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) on promoting active ageing.

Background

2.   Hong Kong's population is ageing rapidly. The Census and Statistics Department has projected that nearly one-third of Hong Kong's population will be aged 65 or above by 2041. According to the definition of the World Health Organisation, active ageing is optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age.

3.   Maintaining an active and productive life after retirement by the elderly is highly beneficial to their own health and our society as a whole. This is also in line with the spirit of active ageing. To this end, LWB and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) have been promoting a sense of worthiness among the elderly and encouraging their participation in community activities through elderly centres and a series of projects promoting active ageing, including the Opportunities for the Elderly Project (OEP) and the Neighbourhood Active Ageing Project (NAAP). LWB has also implemented the Elder Academy (EA) Scheme and the Capacity Building Mileage Programme (CBMP) to provide opportunities of continuous learning for the elderly.

4.   In addition, the Government has been supporting the vision of "Transport for All" and implemented the Public Transport Fare Concession Scheme for the Elderly and Eligible Persons with Disabilities (the $2 Scheme) to facilitate the elderly to move around the community. Given a shrinking labour force with an ageing population, the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) and the Labour Department (LD) will strengthen support to the elderly with a view to assisting their return to the job market.

Encouraging Participation of the Elderly in Community Activities

5.   The Government, through elderly centres located in different districts, provides various support services for the elderly, and encourages and helps them develop a fulfilled social life.   Further, the Government provides funding support through OEP and NAAP for social service agencies and district organisations to carry out activities, thereby encouraging the elderly to realise their potential and fostering a caring community for the elderly.

Elderly Centres

6.   At present, there are more than 200 subvented elderly centres located in the 18 districts throughout the territory which offer a series of support services to the elderly at the district level.   These services include arrangement of social and recreational activities, health education, emotional support and counselling service, etc.   Elderly centres also provide reaching out service for the needy elderly to encourage and assist them to develop social life, as well as referral and support services for those in need.   Since 2014-15, the Government has increased the annual recurrent funding by some $160 million for the purpose of upgrading social centres for the elderly to neighbourhood elderly centres and enabling all subvented elderly centres to increase their manpower and programme expenses, with a view to enhancing information dissemination, volunteer mobilisation, counseling service and carer support, etc.

7.   On the other hand, the Government understands that the elderly wish to enjoy new facilities in modernised elderly centres, such as computer equipment for lifelong learning and fitness exercise equipment for health, etc.   With an allocation of $900 million under the Lotteries Fund, SWD implemented the Improvement Programme of Elderly Centres (IPEC) in April 2012 to enhance the physical setting and facilities of elderly centres.

8.   So far, a total of 237 elderly centres[1] have joined IPEC.   The entire programme will be implemented in phases over a period of six years.   As at January 2015, the Lotteries Fund Advisory Committee allocated funding to 115 elderly centres.   Renovation works have

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[1]   This includes 199 subvented elderly centres and 38 self-financing elderly centres.

commenced in succession, and 46 elderly centres have completed the works and re-opened for service with a new look.

9.   Separately, with a donation of $110 million by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, the Jockey Club Elderly Facilities Modernisation Scheme (JCEFMS) has been launched in parallel to improve the facilities of those elderly centres which have joined IPEC. Funding is provided for these elderly centres to purchase non-standard furniture and equipment.   Currently, a total of 194 elderly centres have joined both IPEC and JCEFMS.

10.   Through the improvements, the elderly centres will not only meet users' changing needs, but also attract more elderly and their carers to use the services, especially those elderly persons who are healthy and energetic.   They may take part in the voluntary services of the centres and make use of the facilities therein to organise different kinds of activities, thereby actively participating in community activities and leading a fulfilled life.

OEP and NAAP

11.   From 1998-99 onwards, SWD launched OEP for the purpose of promoting a sense of worthiness among the elderly and a spirit of caring for the elderly through the activities organised by subvented social service agencies and district organisations, etc (examples include elderly health seminars, handicraft classes, etc).   A total of 276 activities were funded in 2014-15.

12.   On the other hand, NAAP was launched by LWB and the Elderly Commission (EC) in early 2008.   With the elderly playing a leading role and through cross-sectoral collaboration, various NAAP projects mobilise different organisations and individuals interested in serving the community to develop support networks at the neighbourhood level, thus promoting the message of active ageing and caring for the elderly.   Since the implementation of NAAP, a total of 230 district projects have been funded and launched throughout the territory, involving a funding expenditure of around $20 million.

13.   OEP and NAAP have similar themes. Both of them are district-based and provide funding for social service agencies and district organisations to organise activities for the elderly in the community. The Government therefore plans to merge these two projects in 2016 for better use of resources in encouraging elderly people to actively take part

in community affairs and to lead a fruitful elderly life by joining volunteer service as well as activities relating to community education and inter-generational harmony. The Working Group on Active Ageing under EC and the Advisory Committee of OEP set up by SWD have given in-principle support to the proposed merger. SWD will work out the implementation details of the merger.

Promoting Continuous Learning among the Elderly

14.   The Government also encourages the elderly to pursue lifelong learning and lead a more fulfilled life. The Government has been promoting this in terms of both policy and resources.

EA Scheme

15.   The Government has implemented the Elder Academy (EA) Scheme to enable those elderly, who lacked learning opportunities when they were young, to pursue studies in a school setting or even enroll in courses of different disciplines offered by tertiary institutions, thereby realising their aspirations of studying in university. To ensure sustainable development of the EA Scheme, the Government allocated $10 million in 2009 to establish the Elder Academy Development Foundation (EADF) to support the setting up of EAs at primary and secondary schools jointly by schools and welfare organisations. The EA Scheme has been expanded to the level of tertiary institutions since 2008 so that the elderly could have the opportunities to study courses of a more academic nature and covering various disciplines.

16.   The Government further injected $50 million into EADF in March 2014. Some enhancement measures to the EA Scheme have since been put in place with a view to strengthening support for EAs in terms of finance, curriculum development, training for trainers and district network.

17.   The enhancement measures include an increase of funding support to EAs newly set up in primary and secondary schools for implementing a three-year programme, and additional funding support to existing EAs in primary and secondary schools for sustaining and diversifying curriculum development as well as organising inter-generational activities through a new two-year programme. Subsequent to the enhanced funding support, 13 new EAs have been set up in primary and secondary schools, and the total number of such EAs

has therefore been increased from 101 in early 2014 to 114.   At the same time, the additional provision of funding support to sustain existing EAs' operation in running more courses has attracted 44 existing EAs in primary and secondary schools, representing 40% of the total number of EAs, to submit funding applications which have hitherto been approved. On the other hand, following the relaxation of requirement and opening up of the EA Scheme to parent-teacher associations, two primary schools have collaborated with parent-teacher associations to run their EAs.

18.   With the EADF's funding support, the courses offered by the EAs set up in tertiary institutions are becoming more diversified.   Apart from providing sit-in programmes for the elderly in undergraduate courses, elderly teacher training courses have also been organised to train up persons engaged in related services, including those serving in EAs. These courses could help enhance the professionalism of elderly teachers and provide professional personnel in the field of elderly teaching.   At present, some graduates of these courses (including retirees) have already been engaging themselves in teaching in EAs or elderly service units.

19.   The New Territories West Elder Academies Cluster (NTWEAC), which was set up in 2011 with the funding support from EADF, continues to play an important role in planning and coordinating courses and activities of the EAs in the New Territories West area.   NTWEAC has introduced standardised levels of courses, levels of attainment and the requirements for advancement to higher levels.   It has also instituted a credit recognition mechanism whereby records on elderly students, teachers and course attainment profiles could be shared.   These measures encourage the elderly students to attend courses in different districts, thereby benefiting more elderly persons.   At present, the number of NTWEAC members has increased to 38.   Besides, through the co-operation among its EA members, NTWEAC has been able to mobilise more personnel and elderly students to organise activities of a larger scale, and the three rounds of EA Athletic Meet held in the past years are such an example.   NTWEAC has also set up an elderly Chinese Orchestra whereby a group of the elderly with shared interests is pooled together.   The Orchestra has given public performance on a number of occasions to promote the arts culture in the community. Further, district clusters also encourage the elderly's active participation in community affairs.   On this front, NTWEAC has set up an elderly volunteer services team with the Agency for Volunteer Service.   The team, now comprising 60 members, has completed the basic training and been engaging in volunteer services for NTWEAC's ten elderly centres since March 2015.   The team aims at expansion to 150 members within

three years, and training of basic, intermediate and advanced levels would be provided. This would facilitate elderly persons to make good use of their retirement lives to help others and contribute to society, thereby achieving the spirit of "active ageing".

20.   With the increase in the number of EAs, the Government will continue to strongly promote the exchange and cooperation among EAs so that a territory-wide EA network could be gradually established with reference to the development model of NTWEAC. In September 2014, two new clusters, namely the Hong Kong Island Elder Academies Cluster and the Kowloon Elder Academies Cluster, were set up with funding support from EADF. NTWEAC will shortly work with these two new clusters to explore the future development of EA clusters.

CBMP

21.   The Women's Commission commissioned CBMP in 2004, aiming to encourage women of different backgrounds and education levels to pursue lifelong learning and self-development. It seeks to equip them with a positive mindset and enhance their inner strength so that they can cope with different challenges in life. CBMP is run jointly by the Commission, the Open University of Hong Kong, a radio station and over 80 women's groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Courses are conducted in three modes through face-to-face classroom lesson organised by NGOs in 18 districts in Hong Kong, radio broadcast and e-learning on the Internet, with optional supplementary learning activities, in a flexible and convenient manner.

22.   Currently, over 70 courses have been developed, which mainly cover four subject streams, including health, financial management, interpersonal relationship and communication, and topics closely related to their daily lives. There are quite a number of courses suitable for elderly people such as "Happy Retirement" and "Cantonese Opera Appreciation". CBMP courses do not require any formal academic qualifications, and are open to all who have an interest in them at an affordable fee, irrespective of their age and gender. As at end-2014, there were over 75 000 cumulative enrolments in CBMP courses, while over 30% of enrolments to date are aged 60 or above.

Building an Age-friendly Community Environment

23.   The Government strives to build an age-friendly community

environment. In this regard, the Government promotes the vision of "Transport for All" and has implemented the $2 Scheme to facilitate people with disabilities and the elderly to move around the community and to encourage them to participate in community activities.

24. To promote the vision of "Transport for All", the Government has adopted the following strategies: (i) better accessible transport services for all; (ii) better public transport infrastructure and facilities for all; (iii) better streets and pedestrian areas for all; (iv) better planning standards, guidelines and procedures; and (v) better partnership for actions and results. The public transport operators are positive in the provision of more accessible transport services. For instance, the franchised bus companies completed the installation of the bus stop announcement system on board all buses of their fleets in 2013. It is expected that all franchised buses (except some buses in Lantau due to geographical factor) will have been wheelchair accessible with low floor by 2017. All existing MTR stations are equipped with at least one of the barrier-free access facilities including lifts, ramps, stair-lifts and wheelchair aids, etc. Newly constructed stations are barrier-free with provision of such facilities. The Mass Transit Railway Corporation Limited will, if the physical environment permits, add external lifts to those of the existing rail stations which have not been installed with such facilities to connect the concourse to street level before the end of 2018 in phases.

25. In order to encourage the elderly and eligible persons with disabilities to participate in community activities, and foster a caring and inclusive society, the Government has launched the $2 Scheme on general MTR lines, franchised buses and ferries in phases to enable elderly persons aged 65 or above and eligible persons with disabilities[2] to travel on most routes of these transport modes at a concessionary fare of $2 per trip. The number of average daily passenger trips under the Scheme is at present around 730 000, with around 640 000 trips (88%) made by the elderly and the remaining 90 000 trips (12%) made by eligible persons with disabilities. The Government is pressing ahead with the preparation work for extending the $2 Scheme to green minibuses. It is expected that the extension to green minibuses will be rolled out in phases starting from end-March 2015. The related arrangement will be announced as soon as possible after it is finalised.

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[2]   Eligible persons with disabilities are persons aged below 65 with severe disability as defined under the Disability Allowance receiving the allowance and those with 100% disabilities receiving the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance in the same age group.

Promoting Elderly Employment

26.   Hong Kong is facing the challenges of an ageing population, a shrinking labour force and declining productivity.   As a matter of fact, with better health, many of the current and future elderly would be willing to work longer.   These experienced elderly persons joining the workforce will help alleviate the problem of a shrinking labour force. To this end, the Government sees the importance of providing training courses for the elderly to return to the job market, and will also enhance employment support services for mature job seekers, as well as encourage the employers to build an age-friendly working environment to promote the elderly employment.

ERB's Training Courses

27.   In 2015-16, among other target groups, ERB will focus on providing training for people aged 50 or above and help them re-join the job market.   ERB will conduct market research on such people and retired persons to understand their views on continuing employment as well as employers to understand their opinions on employing people aged 50 or above and retired persons.   Subject to the research findings, ERB will launch training courses on a pilot basis.   ERB will also launch in 2015-16 a full-time placement-tied course titled "Foundation Certificate in Workplace Re-entry" to help middle-aged and elderly people (aged 40 or above) return to the job market.

Employment Support Services for Mature Job Seekers

28.   LD will progressively implement, from the second quarter of 2015 onwards, a series of measures to encourage mature persons to re-join the employment market.   LD will organise employment briefings to assist mature persons to recognise the latest situation of the employment market and improve their job search skills; set up a dedicated webpage for mature persons under the Interactive Employment Service website and enhance the functions of the vacancy search terminals to facilitate mature persons in obtaining employment information and looking for vacancies; strengthen the liaison and cooperation with NGOs serving mature persons; and organise large-scale thematic job fairs for mature persons and experience sharing sessions on employment of mature persons for employers.

29.   At present, LD implements the Employment Programme for the Middle-aged (EPM) to encourage employers, through the provision of on-the-job training allowance, employ job seekers aged 40 or above with employment difficulties in full-time permanent posts and provide them with on-the-job training.   As some mature persons may be more interested in part-time jobs, LD will extend the EPM to part-time jobs in the second half of 2015 to encourage employers to provide more part-time employment opportunities for mature persons.   The training allowance will be set at 25% of the employee's monthly salary, up to[3] $3,000, for a period[4] of three to six months.

Encouraging Employers to Foster an Age-friendly Working Environment

30.   LD will continue to encourage employers to adopt employment practices conducive to fostering a friendly work environment for mature persons, thereby attracting them to remain in or return to the job market. LD will also launch, in 2015-16, various promotional and educational activities, such as issuing publications, staging roving exhibitions, broadcasting promotional message, publishing news supplement as well as conducting regular meetings and exchanges with business executives and human resources managers so as to encourage employers to adopt age-friendly employment practices at workplaces and publicise relevant messages across the community.

Conclusion

31.   Members are invited to note the content of the paper.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
March 2015

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[3]   The ceiling of the monthly allowance is the same as the one for the existing EPM.

[4]   The period of providing allowance is the same as the one for the existing EPM.