

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)2255/99-00

(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of meeting
held on Friday, 12 May 2000 at 10:45 am
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building

Members Present : Hon CHAN Yuen-han (Chairman)
Hon HO Sai-chu, SBS, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon David CHU Yu-lin
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Eric LI Ka-cheung, JP
Hon LEE Kai-ming, SBS, JP
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP

Member Absent : Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung

Public Officers Attending : Items I & II

Mr HO Wing-him, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 2

Mr Robin GILL, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 3

Mrs Marion LAI, JP
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration)

Mrs Patricia CHU, JP

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Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services)

Mr Laurie LO

Principal Assistant Secretary for Health and Welfare (Welfare) 1

Miss Diane WONG

Principal Assistant Secretary for Health and Welfare (Welfare) 2

Item III

Mr Robin GILL, JP

Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 3

Miss Diane WONG

Principal Assistant Secretary for Health and Welfare (Welfare) 2

Mrs Patricia CHU, JP

Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services)

Miss Ann LAU

Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Family and Child Welfare)

Item IV

Mr Robin GILL, JP

Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 3

Mrs Carrie LAM, JP

Deputy Secretary for the Treasury 1

Mrs Marion LAI, JP

Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration)

Miss Diane WONG

Principal Assistant Secretary for Health and Welfare (Welfare) 2

Mrs LAM LI Shuet

Chief Social Work Officer (Subvention), Social Welfare Department

Deputations by : Item III

Invitation

Hong Kong Council of Social Service

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Mrs Doris WONG
Assistant Superintendent (Day Care), Po Leung Kuk

Ms LAM Lai-ling
Social Worker, Yan Oi Tong Community Centre

Ms Tabitha NG
Assistant Division Officer
Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Item IV

Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Ms Kay KU
Assistant Director (Development)
Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Mrs Victoria KWOK
Director for Social Services Department
The Salvation Army

Ms Justine LEE
Project Officer
Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Hong Kong Social Workers Association

Dr Angelina YUEN
President

Miss Phyllis WONG
Board member

Fighting for Social Welfare Alliance

Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che

Mr CHENG Ching-fat

Clerk in Attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Assistant Secretary (2) 4

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Staff in Attendance : Ms Joanne MAK
Senior Assistant Secretary (2) 4

Late submission of papers by the Administration

On behalf of the Panel, the Chairman expressed dissatisfaction with the Administration for the late submission of information papers for the meeting. Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 3 (DS(HW)3) apologized for the delay which was caused by a number of reasons and assured members that in the future the Administration would try to issue discussion papers at least one week before the date of a meeting.

I. Date of next meeting and items for discussion
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1943/99-00(01) - (02))

2. In response to the Chairman's question, DS(HW)3 said that the Administration was still in the midst of finalizing the package of proposals on the review of the social welfare subvention system. He said that as soon as the details were finalized, they would be provided to the Panel. He said that he was not in a position to give any firm indication of the timing yet but would liaise with the Clerk if it was ready for discussion before the next meeting.

3. The Chairman said that if the Administration was able to provide the details of the package on or before 5 June 2000, the subject would be discussed at the next regular meeting to be held on 12 June 2000. If not, a special meeting would be held to discuss the subject. The next regular meeting would then discuss -

- (a) Assistance provided to the blind or visually impaired persons in processing and accessing information on the computer;
- (b) Review of family services; and
- (c) Issues arising from the review of CSSA.

4. On item (b), Miss Cyd HO Sau-lan referred to the recent cases of child abuse and suggested to discuss the subject of child protection. She wished to know whether adequate support was provided by schools and youth centres to children to cope with stress arising from family problems. Noting that there had been a few cases of children witnessing their parents committing suicide, Miss HO wanted to discuss what kind of support and assistance was available to the children.

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5. On the problem of child abuse, Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services) (DDSW(S)) informed members that a lot of work had been done in the past few years to cope with the problem and item (b) was actually a different topic. If members were interested to know more about the efforts to deal with child abuse, a separate paper could be prepared.

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6. The Chairman referred to the "List of follow-up actions by the Administration" and asked the Administration to respond to the outstanding items on the list as soon as possible.

II. "Promoting Self-reliance" Strategy (LC Paper No. CB(2)1943/99-00(03))

7. As the Administration's paper on the subject was only tabled at the meeting, the Chairman invited Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 2 (DS(HW)2) to brief members on the salient points of the paper.

8. DS(HW)2 said that the paper set out a package of measures to be implemented in 2000-01 to promote self-reliance. As the Administration planned to seek funding approval of the Finance Committee (FC) in June 2000 for the implementation of the new measures, he would like to know if members had any further comments on the proposals.

9. Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration) (DDSW(A)) then briefed members on the details of the package of proposals as set out in paragraphs 3 to 37 of the paper. A summary of the new measures was provided in paragraph 2 of the paper.

10. Referring to paragraph 7 of the paper on the active employment assistance (AEA) programme for CSSA low-income recipients, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan questioned if there was really such an effective retraining programme that would enable its participants to earn a lot more after attending it. He considered that given the economic downturn and the downward pressure on wages, it was impossible for low-skilled workers to easily shift from \$5 000 job to a \$10 000 one just by receiving retraining. He felt that the Administration did not seem to know much about the levels of salaries earned by people who had attended retraining and he suspected that the proposed programme might turn out to be a nuisance to the recipients. He suggested to cancel the programme and the resources thus saved be used to provide a special allowance for recipients to meet the costs incurred in the course of finding work (such as for buying new clothing, haircuts, travelling and so on).

11. In response, DDSW(A) explained that the Administration appreciated the difficulty of low-income recipients who were working on a full-time basis to spare time to attend the AEA programme. For that reason, their participation in the programme would be entirely on a voluntary basis. For those who signed up for it, arrangements would be made by SWD to suit the participants' schedule as far as possible. DDSW(A) considered that

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whether or not a recipient was able to upgrade his work skills and find a much better-paid job depended on the recipient himself and the job market in a particular period of time.

12. DS(HW)2 said that the suggestion of providing a special allowance for the recipients to meet the costs arising from a job-finding process could be further considered by the Administration. However, he felt that it was not likely to be adopted given the financial constraints. DDSW(A) took the view that it was more important to arouse the recipients' motivation to work and upgrade their work skills to enhance their success rate in securing employment.

13. Referring to paragraphs 4 and 8 of the paper, Mr LAW Chi-kwong pointed out that the Administration would have to recruit about 130 additional staff for the Social Security Field Unit (SSFU) in order to implement the new measures. However, he noted that following the recruitment of new staff on non-civil servant contract basis, the turnover rate of SSFU had become very high. In view of the staff shortage problem, he had doubt on the ability of SSFU to implement the new measures effectively. He therefore suggested that the Administration should set up a fund to finance NGOs to operate the proposed services.

14. DDSW(A) replied that actually many of the proposals set out in the paper would be operated by NGOs. She said that SWD would tackle the problem of the high turnover rate of SSFU by measures like offering employment contracts for a longer duration and improving the training to help new recruits develop a greater sense of involvement in their work. Mr LAW requested the Administration to provide information on the turnover rate of SSFU over the past year.

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15. Miss Cyd HO Sau-lan requested the Administration to provide the following information for members' reference -

- (a) the education level of the low-income recipients;
- (b) the retraining opportunities available to these recipients; and
- (c) what level of skills that the recipients were expected to be able to attain after attending the retraining programme and the current wage levels of the jobs requiring this higher level of work skills.

16. DDSW(A) admitted that most of the recipients who had remained unemployed for a long time were those who had a low education level. She agreed to provide information on the education level of the low-income recipients. She said that it remained the Administration's target to help these recipients to upgrade their skills through retraining programmes so that they could re-join the workforce and gain self-reliance. She added that the Administration would evaluate the new measures in three years' time to seek improvements.

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17. DS(HW)2 pointed out that since the implementation of the AEA programme in June 1999, the Administration had received very positive feedback from some participants who considered that the programme was useful and was able to help them secure employment. However, Miss HO considered that the Administration should first conduct a survey on the labour market to see the general income level/trend of the workers with low working skill. She was of the view that the Administration should assess the impact on these workers' wage levels if an additional 1 900 low-income and 11 000 single-parent CSSA recipients were brought into the labour market through the AEA programme. She was worried that the resources committed to the programme would be indirectly subsidizing businessmen as the programme might result in further dragging down the wage levels of the workers with low level of skills. However, DDSW(A) considered that the issues raised by Miss HO related to the supply and demand of the labour market and they should be discussed only after more information and data in these respects had been collected.

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18. Mr HO Sai-chu expressed support for the proposed new measures. In response to Mr HO's question, DDSW(A) said that it was estimated that the relaxation of the eligibility criteria of disregarded earnings would benefit about 2 000 CSSA recipients. Mr HO took the view that if the maximum amount of disregarded earning (i.e. \$1 805) was raised, it could help increase the recipients' motivation to work. DDSW(A) replied that it could be reviewed when the new arrangements relating to the disregarded earning as a whole came under review in two years' time. However, Mr HO considered that the Administration should review the amount earlier.

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19. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan asked whether the Administration would consider contracting out the employment assistance services under the "Promoting Self-reliance" strategy to NGOs so that SWD would not be involved in providing the services. He was of the view that the department should only concentrate on the tasks of scrutinizing and approving CSSA applications. Mr LAW Chi-kwong shared similar views and considered that the proposals in paragraph 38(a), (b) and (e)(iii) should be implemented by NGOs. He reiterated his view that the Administration would not be able to implement the proposals effectively due to the problem of staff shortage of SSFU. In response, DDSW(S) clarified that actually items (e)(i) to (iv) in the paragraph were all to be implemented by NGOs. As regards item (e)(v), the services would be jointly provided by SWD and NGOs. She also anticipated that item (d) would be operated by NGOs after the relevant review was completed. Therefore, the proposals in items (d) and (e) would, to a very large extent, be implemented by NGOs. Mr LAW Chi-kwong then requested the Administration to provide justifications as to why the proposals in items (a) and (b) were not to be implemented by NGOs.

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20. The Chairman considered that the Administration should provide more information and data in its submission to FC to justify the effectiveness of the proposed programmes.

III. Child care services

(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1943/99-00(04) and (05))

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21. At the Chairman's invitation, DDSW(S) briefed members on the salient points of the Administration's paper on the subject.

22. Ms Tabitha NG of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) pointed out that the existing child care services were unable to meet the changing needs of the community fully. She then briefed members on the improvements recommended by HKCSS as detailed in paragraphs 5 to 7 of its submission. In addition, HKCSS suggested that the working group on the harmonization of pre-primary services provided by kindergarten and child care centre should include representatives from NGOs who could bring the views of the sector to the working group.

Adm 23. Referring to paragraph 9 of the Administration's paper, Mr Fred LI Wah-ming enquired about the location of the five child care centres in which the Administration was going to set up extended hours service units. DDSW(S) clarified that extended hour services were being provided in these five centres. In fact, the proposal was to provide subsidized extended hour service in 100 aided child care centers. Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Family and Child Welfare) (AD(SW)(E&CW)) replied that these extended hours service units would be provided in the child care centres throughout the existing 18 districts. Priority would be given to those districts with a high concentration of single parents, new arrival families and working parents, such as Kwun Tong, Shatin, Tuen Mun, Sham Shui Po and Kwai Tsing. At Mr LI's request, DDSW(S) agreed to provide the information in writing after the meeting.

24. Mr LI further enquired whether flexibility would be allowed to approve applications by new arrivals, who did not meet the requirement of one-year residence in Hong Kong, for assistance to meet their child care centre fees. AD(SW)(E&CW) replied that for cases which had demonstrated needs for the fee assistance, they could be approved by the Regional Senior Social Security Officer (SSSO) at discretion. For CSSA households with new arrival children who did not meet the residence requirement, their claims would be considered by SSFU staff who could refer the cases to RSWO for discretionary approval.

Adm 25. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan referred to the existing 24 mutual help child care groups and asked for details of the Administration's plan to promote the development of this kind of informal child care support. DDSW(S) replied that actually only some of these child care groups needed government subsidies. She agreed to provide details of the assistance rendered to these groups after the meeting. She said that the development of this kind of informal child care support should be encouraged so that parents could have more choices. At present, SWD had not set a target of the number of such groups. To ensure the service quality, she said that the resources for the provision of training on child-minding for single parents would be used as well to organize training for child minders of these mutual help child care groups.

26. Mr LAW Chi-kwong commented that it was not healthy to the development of

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children if they were left at child care centres for a long period of time each day and asked the Administration to address the problem in its family policy. He considered that the Administration should not think that it had solved all problems simply by extending the service hours of child care centres. In response, DDSW(S) clarified that the plan to extend service hours was not intended to encourage parents to work longer hours but to facilitate those who had the need for the service outside normal hours. In response to Mr LAW's question, AD(SW)(E&CW) elaborated that for such CSSA families, they could apply for financial assistance to meet the extra cost arising from the extended service hours. For non-CSSA families which could not afford to pay for the extra cost, they could apply from charitable funds for subsidies to meet the fees of the extended service hours. Mr LAW and Dr YEUNG Sum urged the Administration to consider giving assistance to the low-income families which had a need for the extended hours service but could not afford to pay for it. Ms Tabitha NG of HKCSS pointed out that it cost a family an extra \$800 each month to use the extended hours service, which was quite a substantial amount to the low-income families.

Adm

27. In response to Dr YEUNG Sum's comments, DDSW(S) said that after funding approval was obtained to implement the proposals as set out in the paper, the Administration would strengthen publicity on the availability of the service.

28. The Chairman expressed support for the proposals under discussion to enhance flexibility of child care service to meet the changing needs of the community and urged the Administration to step up publicity on the subject in the future. DSHW3 said that the Administration would work closely with NGOs in providing child care services as they were in the best position to know the real needs of working parents in their respective districts.

29. Ms LAM Lai-ling of Yan Oi Tong Community Centre urged the Administration to step up efforts in regulating child-minding service and enhance the support provided to child-minders. She pointed out that actually the mutual help child care support was not really of much help to working women or those who had to attend retraining because they could hardly spare the time to help their neighbours to look after their children in return. She requested the Administration to take note of this point. In addition, she considered that the Administration should address the needs for child care services for children aged between 6 and 12. In this connection, the Chairman remarked that demands for child care services for children aged between 6 and 12 could be discussed, if time allowed, under the item of "Review of family service" at the next meeting.

IV. Implementation of the Enhanced Productivity Programme (EPP) in the welfare sector

(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1943/99-00(06) and (07))

30. With reference to the submission from HKCSS, Mrs Victoria KWOK of the Council briefed members on the recommendations made by the Council to improve the

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implementation of EPP in the welfare sector.

31. Dr Angelina YUEN of Hong Kong Social Workers Association pointed out that it was not appropriate to implement EPP in subvented NGOs. She explained that it was difficult for them to reduce the existing welfare services, which were mostly essential to the community and could not be substituted by other services. Moreover, as the size of many NGOs was small as compared with many government departments; it would be difficult for them to achieve savings by re-deployment of resources. She considered that the Administration should not reduce subvention by the same percentage across-the-board without taking into account the practical difficulty faced by individual NGOs.

32. Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che of the Fighting for Social Welfare Alliance expressed objection to the implementation of EPP in the welfare sector, which had all along been suffering from inadequate provision of resources already. He further pointed out that in some areas of welfare services, the rigid implementation of the programme had already led to staff layoffs and adversely affected the service quality. Mr CHENG Ching-fat of the Alliance said that the ultimate purpose of EPP was only to cut provision of resources for the welfare sector. He considered that it was unfair to implement EPP in the welfare sector when the Government had recorded a budgetary surplus of \$9.9 billion and that the education sector was allowed to be exempted from the implementation of EPP. He said that the programme had not only led to a decline in the staff morale, growing confrontation between the management and frontline staff but also exerted much pressure on the staff. He urged the Administration to give up implementing the programme in the sector.

33. Dr YEUNG Sum asked what the consequence would be for NGOs should they fail to achieve the 4% EPP target in the next two years. In response, Deputy Secretary for the Treasury 1 (DS(T)1) said that the implementation of EPP in the public sector was announced by the Chief Executive in his 1998 Policy Address. The Administration had since then been engaged in much discussion, particularly with the welfare sector which involved some 180 NGOs, to explore practical ways to help it achieve the EPP target. She pointed out that the Administration appreciated that the departments and organizations concerned needed to streamline and re-engineer their service units in order to achieve savings without affecting service quality. Therefore, they had been given 18 months since October 1998 to do the necessary groundwork. She pointed out that the Administration remained of the view that all the organizations in the public sector should be able to achieve the 5% EPP target. She considered that it would be unacceptable for any public-funded organization to adopt an irresponsible attitude by refusing to accept the possibility of meeting the EPP target without giving it a try.

34. DS(T)1 clarified that the Administration did not rigidly require all government departments to achieve 2% EPP savings in 2001-02 if they had practical difficulty in meeting the target. Instead, they could make it up in 2002-03. Therefore, much flexibility was given to departments in achieving the 4% EPP target in the next two years.

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35. DS(T)1 further said that each government department had full autonomy to decide its own ways to achieve the required productivity gains and that the central government had not given any instruction in this respect. As regards the welfare sector, she said that, theoretically, if SWD managed to achieve more than the required savings and was able to use the surplus to help NGOs to meet the EPP target, there would be no objection from the central government.

36. DS(T)1 stressed that the central government had not given any instruction to SWD to adopt a broad-brush approach and meet the EPP target just by cutting the average subvention for NGOs without considering their circumstances. She said that in the case of the Hospital Authority, she had advised that the Authority should look at the situation of individual hospitals in the implementation of EPP.

37. DS(T)1 disagreed that government departments were in a better position than NGOs to achieve productivity gains because over the years there had been little expansion for many of the departments. In contrast, she pointed out that despite financial constraints in the current year, allocation to direct social welfare services had still registered an increase of 9.6%. Moreover, as the Financial Secretary had decided to make available an additional \$85 million for the welfare sector to expand existing facilities such as sheltered workshops and residential homes for the elderly, more funding would be received by some NGOs. She said that she had also recently told representatives of HKCSS that the Administration would provide new resources, in the same way as allocating the \$85 million this time, to finance welfare services which the Government had pledged to provide. In conclusion, she invited members to note that the current proposal was actually a win-win solution which aimed to enable the allocation of more resources to the sector and, at the same time, enhance the cost-effectiveness in the delivery of services.

38. Dr YEUNG considered that the Administration should take note of the fact that there were great differences in the size of NGOs and small NGOs would have practical difficulty in their re-deployment of resources for achieving productivity gains. He asked the Administration to discuss with NGOs on their problems in implementing EPP and not to adopt a broad-brush approach.

39. Mr LAW Chi-kwong proposed the following motion, which was seconded by Mr LEE Cheuk-yan -

"That this Panel requests that the Government, when implementing EPP in subvented welfare agencies during the years from 2001 to 2003, should strive to meet the target of achieving 4% savings in operating expenditure through service rationalization, instead of adopting a broad-brush approach to cut the average subvention for service organizations. In the event that the target of 4% savings cannot be achieved through service rationalization, the Government should not force the subvented welfare agencies to achieve full EPP savings."

Adm Members expressed unanimous support for the motion and requested the Administration to

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take note of the deputations' views.

40. DSHW3 said that the Health and Welfare Bureau had been maintaining a regular dialogue with NGOs to explore if they could agree on a service rationalization approach. However, he found that so far it had proved to be very difficult to really achieve much progress. Therefore, the Administration was obliged to fall back on the across-the-board approach but he assured members that it would continue discussion with NGOs to identify the service areas where there was room for achieving EPP target.

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41. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 1 pm.

Legislative Council Secretariat

8 June 2000