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LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

Subcommittee on welfare services for squatter areas in the New Territories

Minutes of meeting
held on Tuesday, 25 April 2000 at 4:30 pm
in Conference Room B of the Legislative Council Building

- Members Present** : Hon CHAN Yuen-han (Chairman)
Hon David CHU Yu-lin
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon LEE Kai-ming, SBS, JP
Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP
- Members Absent** : Hon HO Sai-chu, SBS, JP
Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung
- Member Attending** : Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
- Public Officers Attending** : Mr Parrish NG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Home Affairs
- Mrs Suzanna MA
Senior Executive Officer (Community Building)
Home Affairs Bureau
- Miss Ann HON
Assistant Director of Social Welfare
(Youth and Human Resource Management)

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Mr H W CHEUNG
Chief Social Work Officer (Youth)
Social Welfare Department

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

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

I. Election of Chairman

Miss CHAN Yuen-han was elected Chairman of the Subcommittee.

II. Meeting with the Administration

(LC Papers Nos. CB(2)1657/99-00(01) and CB(2)1782/99-00(01))

2. At the invitation of the Chairman, Principal Assistant Secretary for Home Affairs (PAS(HA)) briefed members on the information paper provided by the Administration. PAS(HA) highlighted the special services provided by both the government departments and service agencies concerned to meet the needs of new arrivals. Such services included education, employment, training and housing, as well as various types of induction programmes and community activities specially organized for new arrivals. PAS(HA) advised that further information could be provided to members if they were interested in the details.

3. PAS(HA) advised that according to a survey conducted by the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) in 1999, only about 1% of the new arrivals lived in temporary accommodation, such as squatter areas. The Administration believed that only a small portion of new arrivals lived in temporary accommodation.

4. PAS(HA) stressed that the problems existing in squatter areas had always been an issue of concern to the Government. He said that residents could reflect their needs to the relevant departments through various existing channels, such as District Councils (DCs), district offices, Social Welfare Department (SWD) and non-government welfare organizations, for follow-up actions. He further advised members that the paper provided by the Administration had set out the information about the resources input by the Government for improving the environment of squatter areas over the past few years. Moreover, the Government had put in place a mechanism for members of the local communities, such as community leaders, members of Rural Committees and residents, to

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participate in the discussion on the priorities of the improvement works concerned.

5. PAS(HA) reiterated that effective solution to the problems faced by residents in squatter areas lay in the actual improvements that could specifically address the nature of such problems. He considered that mere emphasis on the provision of Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project (NLCDP) services for squatter areas might not be a genuine and effective solution to meeting the needs of the residents.

6. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan noted that the Administration had spent \$29 million on some 230 improvement works in squatter areas last year, and \$24 million would be earmarked for completing the improvement measures in the coming year. However, he questioned whether the Government could have identified the problems in squatter areas and adopted such improvement measures, had there not been social worker service teams in squatter areas. He requested the Administration to provide information on the number of improvement works out of the 230-odd improvement works which were carried out after the Government had identified the needs of the residents reflected through NLCDP teams or other channels, such as Rural Committees. He opined that the Administration should seriously consider the need to set up NLCDP teams in rural squatter areas to assist in referring the problems faced by residents and relaying their needs to the Government.

7. Regarding the figures requested by Mr LEE Cheuk-yan, PAS(HA) explained that as the Administration had not kept such figures, it might take a longer time to collate information before the figures could be provided to Mr LEE. PAS(HA) pointed out that at present, referring residents' problems to the Government was one of the functions of DCs, and the Chairmen of Rural Committees were also included in the structures of DCs in the New Territories (NT). Moreover, the Administration had set up working groups in each NT district to follow up and monitor the implementation of improvement works in their respective rural areas.

8. However, Mr LEE Cheuk-yan opined that DC members, in fact, would not pay door-to-door visits to residents to understand their needs. Therefore, DC members could not totally replace the service teams formed by social workers and take up their role as "frontline" staff to reflect the problems faced by residents in their living to government departments. Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Youth and Human Resource Management) (ADSW(Y&HRM)) clarified that NLCDP teams were not set up to pay door-to-door visits to residents. She said that the Government in fact normally identified the service needs of residents through their representatives. The teams would only pay home visits to places which were relatively remote. PAS(HA) pointed out that having regard to the small area of Hong Kong and the full implementation of the District Administration Scheme, adequate channels were available for the public to reflect their problems and needs to the Government. He therefore queried whether there was a genuine need for continuing to extend the provision of

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NLCDP services which were “delivered-to-home” in nature. As the use of public money was involved, he called upon members to give thorough consideration to this issue.

9. As NLCDP teams had always been working hard behind the scene, Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung anticipated that the statistical information to be provided by the Government in due course would not accurately reflect the number of cases actually referred by them. He also questioned if the attitude of the Administration was tantamount to obliterating the efforts and contributions made by NLCDP teams in the past in offering assistance to residents. In particular, he pointed out that in NT, it was absolutely necessary for NLCDP teams to be set up in order to reflect the problems faced by residents living in relatively remote areas to the relevant departments and to seek their assistance.

10. In response, PAS(HA) reiterated that the Administration had not obliterated the contributions of NLCDP teams. He pointed out that it had been 30 years since the implementation of NLCDPs in the 1970s. With the substantial increase in the overall provision of welfare and community building services as well as the full implementation of the District Administration Scheme over the past 30 years, the role of NLCDPs in filling social service gaps was fast diminishing.

11. Miss Cyd HO pointed out that the family and community service centres providing services for residents in the northeast NT clustered mainly in Yuen Long. The long travel made it difficult for residents living in remote areas in the northeast NT to obtain services from these centres. Moreover, Miss HO cautioned that an increasing number of new arrivals were moving into rural squatter areas in NT in recent years. As they had little knowledge about the services provided by government departments, it was imperative for the Administration to set up outreaching NLCDP teams in these areas to provide services to these residents. She also questioned if the Government could ensure that adequate channels were also available for residents living in villages with no representatives to reflect their needs to the Administration.

12. Moreover, Miss HO requested the Administration to provide the following information -

- (a) out of the 200-odd improvement works in squatter areas completed in the year 1999/2000 with the \$29 million government funding, the number of improvement works that were carried out in response to the requests made by residents’ representatives; and
- (b) the channels through which the Government identified the needs of residents in the 4 900 cases mentioned in the Administration’s paper and took follow-up actions accordingly.

13. In reply, ADSW(Y&HRM) advised that, in fact, home visits to residents were also made by home help teams, family service centres, Support Teams for

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the Elderly and voluntary workers teams, etc. Moreover, youth centres would also organize youngsters to visit the elderly persons living in rural areas from time to time. In Yuen Long District alone, about 70 000 residents had been contacted over the past year. Moreover, the SWD distributed publicity leaflets to residents through village representatives with a view to contacting residents in need as far as possible. ADSW(Y&HRM) cited the example of the serious flooding occurred in NT more than a week ago, and pointed out that the SWD had immediately sent staff to the affected districts to provide emergency aid for the residents.

14. Miss Cyd HO considered the above responses given by ADSW(Y&HRM) as recognizing the needs of residents in the northeast NT for outreaching services. She further queried if the piecemeal approach of providing services to residents through the occasional visits made by voluntary workers teams could replace the services provided under NLCDPs. She also considered that in the absence of sufficient utilities, such as water and electricity supplies, in most rural areas, and with an increasing number of new arrivals living there, the Administration should admit that on average, the demand for social and welfare services from residents living in squatter areas in NT was higher than that from the urbanites. Therefore, the Administration should not terminate the provision of NLCDP services for these areas on the ground that the service population was below 3 000.

15. In reply, ADSW(Y&HRM) clarified that at present, outreaching services were not provided solely by NLCDP teams. She pointed out that social centres for the elderly, youth centres or family service centres would also provide direct door-to-door services in response to the needs of the public. These centres provided a wider range of services than those of NLCDP teams.

16. PAS(HA) pointed out that with the development of the District Administration Scheme, other supporting networks could take up the role of NLCDP teams in rendering referral services, thereby diminishing the relative importance of NLCDPs. Moreover, he urged members to note that, right from the very beginning when NLCDP services were introduced, it had not been the intention of the Administration to implement NLCDP services on a permanent basis. On the contrary, NLCDPs were meant to be a “stop-gap measure” to cater to the urgent needs of residents living in less developed areas.

17. PAS(HA) highlighted the fact that as the funding for NLCDP services involved public money, the Audit Commission had conducted a review in October 1997 and had made a number of recommendations to the Administration, including the need to review whether there remained sufficient justifications for those projects with a service population below 3 000 and projects with no clearance/redevelopment dates to continue. The Administration was now actively following-up the recommendations.

18. In response to the questions raised by Miss Cyd HO, ADSW(Y&HRM) advised that the clients in the 4 900 cases mentioned in the paper were provided

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with different types of services, such as meal delivery, assistance in CSSA applications, family disputes settlement and so on. In fact, such a wide range of services could hardly be provided by one NLCDP team only.

19. Mr David CHU noted that there were about 80 squatter areas in North District, each providing homes to about 100 households. He asked if the Administration had been paying regular home visits to and making telephone contacts with these families or their village representatives, so as to keep abreast of the needs of the residents.

20. In response, PAS(HA) advised that both DC members and liaison officers of district offices had been keeping in touch with residents in their respective districts. ADSW(Y&HRM) added that the Support Teams for the Elderly had been paying regular visits to elderly residents at least once every two months. Moreover, the SWD was required to submit annual reports to DCs, briefing them on the adequacy and future developments of social and welfare service facilities in the districts concerned. Therefore, residents and DC members could reflect their views through this mechanism.

21. Mr David CHU further suggested that the Administration should set the target of visiting a squatter area in NT at least once a year. However, PAS(HA) advised that there would be difficulties in implementing that suggestion and pointed out that individual squatter areas were not counted as separate units in terms of government planning at present .

22. Mr LAW Chi-kwong considered that the implementation of the District Administration Scheme could not ensure the provision of services for squatter areas in NT. He pointed out that in addition to providing direct services to residents, NLCDP teams could also help residents learn how to build up and serve their communities. He requested the Administration to take note of this function performed by NLCDP teams.

23. Mr LAW Chi-kwong also asked how HAB interpreted the decision made by the former Executive Council of “not extending NLCDP services to rural areas”. In reply, PAS(HA) explained that the policy was not to extend NLCDP services to rural areas, including squatter areas in rural areas.

24. However, Mr LAW Chi-kwong pointed out that when the former Executive Council made the above decision in 1995, NLCDP services had already been available in rural areas. Hence he could not understand the meaning of “not extending NLCDP services to rural areas”. In his view, the only possible interpretation for that decision was not to increase the amount of resources allocated for providing services in rural areas at that time. He opined that that policy did not rule out the re-deployment of resources and NLCDP teams to continue the provision of services to rural areas. The Chairman added that the Administration should take note of the fact that impoverishment among the lower class of Hong Kong society at present was more acute when compared

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with the situation in 1995. Therefore, the Government should be more obliged to provide the necessary welfare services for these people.

25. In response, PAS(HA) advised that according to the Government's understanding, the decision made by the former Executive Council was to provide NLCDP services only to those temporary housing areas which were qualified for such services under the established policy, and to those public rental housing estates which were affected by the Comprehensive Redevelopment Programme. Hence NLCDP services would not be extended to areas beyond the existing service areas.

26. Mr LEE Kai-ming shared Mr LAW Chi-kwong's views that apart from providing direct services to residents, NLCDP teams could also encourage residents to uphold the caring spirit to build up their communities. The role played by NLCDP teams, therefore, was very important. He also pointed out that in recent years he had been receiving complaints from residents in rural areas about inadequate services and facilities. He noted during his visits to these areas that the utilities and basic amenities for residents were grossly inadequate. Therefore, he queried the justifications for the Administration to cut the services. Moreover, he pointed out that it was very unreasonable for the Government to set the inflexible requirement of limiting the provision of NLCDP services to areas with service population of at least 3 000. It had neglected the fact that one NLCDP team could not cater to the needs of residents living in districts covering relatively large areas. He also pointed out that some DC members told him during the previous visit arranged by social workers that only then did they realize the presence of residents in such remote areas.

27. In response, PAS(HA) advised that the adequacy of services was merely relative. One could never say that the level of services was absolutely adequate or inadequate. He remarked that there were sufficient justifications at present for not extending NLCDP services any further. He also believed that, with increasing demand for better quality of living, the number of complaints about inadequate provision of services would persist. He clarified that the Administration had not come up with any timetable for the gradual reduction of NLCDP teams, but he pointed out the need for the Government to review the provision of services in the light of the recommendations made by the Audit Commission. It was imperative for a responsible government to provide services according to established policies and set criteria, such as the population requirement, instead of changing the criteria at will upon individual requests. He earnestly asked members to note that under exceptional circumstances, such as the case of Tai O, the Administration had exercised flexibility in arranging for services.

28. Mr LEE Kai-ming recalled the presence of Mr TSUI Kwan-ping, Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs, in a recent visit during which Mr TSUI concurred that services and facilities provided for residents living in the areas were inadequate.

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29. PAS(HA) clarified that Mr TSUI Kwan-ping had merely recognized that problems did exist in the visiting areas, and had agreed that these problems should be followed up by the relevant government departments. This point had been made clear in the minutes of the meeting of the Panel on Welfare Services held on 13 March 2000.

30. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung requested the Administration to compare the numbers of complaints made by residents living in villages with and without NLCDP services and provide the relevant information. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung reiterated that the Government should not apply the service population criterion only when determining the provision of services for a particular area, without giving due regard to its geographical conditions. He also queried the number of visits to residents made by the “Rural Area Mobile Service Teams” mentioned in the paper provided by the Administration, and the manner in which such visits were conducted. He therefore requested the Administration to provide information on the specific duties performed by these mobile teams and their target clients.

31. In response, PAS(HA) remarked that the Administration had not kept such data for comparing the numbers of complaints received from areas with and without NLCDP services. He pointed out that it was difficult to draw up a set of demarcation criteria for squatter areas in order to make such a comparison. PAS(HA) clarified that while the size of service population was a very important indicator, it was not the only factor the Administration relied on. Regarding “Rural Area Mobile Service Teams”, ADSW(Y&HRM) said that there were altogether three such mobile teams in North District. They comprised voluntary workers only and were backed up with the guidance of social workers. Another six mobile teams would be set up in future. She pointed out that these voluntary worker teams conducted home visits to their target clients every two months, or maintained contact with their clients through telephone conversation. In addition, the duties of the voluntary workers included visiting elderly persons, briefing them on the rights and benefits they were entitled to, as well as referring them to the services they needed. She also pointed out that the SWD had all along been providing appropriate training for voluntary worker teams.

32. Miss Cyd HO reiterated that the Administration should not apply the service population criterion in determining the provision of services for rural areas in NT. She remarked that with no provision of utilities and basic amenities such as water and electricity supplies and refuse collection services in some of the rural areas, the demand for services in these areas was much greater than that in urban areas. Hence the Administration should not inflexibly apply the criterion of service population in determining the provision of services for rural areas. In addition, Miss HO requested the Administration to confirm whether voluntary worker teams could replace professional social worker teams stationed in rural communities in establishing close relationship with residents to achieve the target of “helping people to stand on their own feet”.

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33. The Chairman added that members of the Panel on Welfare Services were quite unanimous in requesting the Government to meet the great demand of squatter areas in NT for NLCDP services. In view of the recent changes occurring in North District such as the increase in the number of new arrivals, the aging and impoverishing population, new problems were emerging in the district. As such, she considered that the Administration should no longer repeat the arguments it had put forward previously and simply reject the views and requests of the concern groups. She requested that HAB should re-examine the existing policies to make improvements in the light of the existing environment. At the same time, she requested the Administration to note the “empowerment” role played by NLCDP teams which were supposed to assist the residents to learn about and fight for their own benefits.

34. In response, PAS(HA) clarified that the Administration was aware of the problems in rural areas, and had been making efforts for improvement. Nevertheless, it believed that these problems might not necessarily be solved by NLCDP services. Instead, they could be solved more flexibly with the provision of various types of services by the relevant government departments. ADSW(Y&HRM) also pointed out that after problems had been identified by voluntary workers teams, the necessary services would still be provided by professional social workers. Nevertheless, the Chairman and members held that voluntary mobile teams alone were insufficient for meeting the needs of residents. They held that the Administration should set up professional social worker teams to provide services for squatter areas in NT because only professional social workers could spend a great deal of time on establishing mutual trust with residents, understanding clearly their needs and following-up their problems.

35. In conclusion, the Chairman reiterated that the Administration should provide the following information:

- (a) a breakdown, by the types of services, of the 4 900 cases mentioned in the paper provided by the Government, together with information on the persons or organizations that made these 4 900 referrals; and
- (b) the Administration should look into the possibility of quoting relevant examples to illustrate the differences between the numbers of complaints made by residents living in areas with and without NLCDP services.

Adm PAS(HA) undertook to follow-up the above requests.

III. Date of Next Meeting

36. It was agreed that the second meeting of the Subcommittee should be held at 2:30 pm on 16 May 2000.

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(Post-meeting note: At the request of the Administration, the second meeting of the Subcommittee was re-scheduled to 10:45 am on 16 June 2000.)

37. The meeting ended at 6:20 pm.

Legislative Council Secretariat
28 June 2000