

Chapter XI : Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

11.1 At the Chairman's invitation, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF), Dr E K YEOH, briefed members on the proposed budget and the major areas of work of the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau for the coming year (Appendix V-10).

Vacancy situation of public markets and cooked food markets

11.2 Mr Fred LI noted the high vacancy rates of some public markets and cooked food centres. He remarked that there were some 20 public markets/cooked food centres with a vacancy rate of 40% or above. He asked whether the Administration would consider closing down those public markets and cooked food centres where high vacancy rates persisted. Mr TAM Yiu-chung expressed similar concern and urged the Administration to work out practical solutions. He remarked that where some markets were found not viable and warranted closing down, the Administration should make appropriate compensation or reprovisioning arrangements for the stall holders.

11.3 In response, SHWF advised that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) was undertaking an overall review of the occupancy situation and long-term viability of individual public markets and cooked food markets. Where high vacancy rates persisted, the Administration would consider the option of closing down the relevant markets. The Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene (DFEH) also advised that while FEHD had plans to undertake air-conditioning retro-fitting and/or general improvement works for some markets to improve their trading environment, the department would critically assess the long-term viability of individual markets and work out proper arrangements in the case of closing down of some markets.

Improvement works for public markets/cooked food markets

11.4 Mr Jasper TSANG noted that FEHD planned to commence the installation of air-conditioning and general improvement works in a number of markets/cooked food centres in 2005. He noted from the stall holders of some of the markets where improvement works had been carried out in the past, such as those of Yau Ma Tei Market, that improvement works might not necessarily improve the trading environment but cause undue inconvenience to users instead. Mr TSANG stressed that affected stall holders should be consulted on the design and implementation arrangements of such improvement works. In response, DFEH advised that the Administration would consult the affected stall holders and

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the Market Management Consultative Committee prior to the implementation of improvement programmes, and would endeavour to minimize the inconvenience to the affected parties during the construction period. In the case of Yau Ma Tei Market, improvement works were considered essential by the Fire Services Department for compliance with the statutory fire safety requirements.

Contracting out the management of public markets

11.5 Miss CHAN Yuen-han noted that the Administration had contracted out the management of all the four public markets in Kowloon City District on a pilot basis for two years from 1 March 2004. She expressed concern that workers employed by the contractors would be subject to wage exploitation, which according to her observation was a common phenomenon among the contractors engaged by FEHD and the Housing Department for service contracts. She enquired whether measures were in place to ensure that reasonable wages were paid to workers.

11.6 In response, DFEH advised that to prevent wage exploitation, bidders for FEHD's service contracts were required to state in their tenders the wages they would pay to the workers employed for the contracted services, and the committed wages would be scored in the tender assessment process. The committed wages would be stipulated in the service contracts awarded by FEHD. FEHD would require its contractors to sign employment contracts with their staff and encourage the contractors to use autopay service to pay wages. The contractors were also required to file monthly returns to FEHD on the wages paid to their workers, and to post the committed wages at places where workers reported duty to ensure that all workers understood how much they should be paid. Workers were encouraged to report any suspected wage exploitation cases to FEHD or the Labour Department for appropriate follow-up actions.

Nutrition labelling scheme and genetically modified food labelling

11.7 Miss CHOY So-yuk noted that a provision of \$3 million had been earmarked for undertaking a Regulatory Impact Assessment on the proposed nutrition labelling scheme and related public education programmes. She enquired if the Administration had set aside resources to take forward labelling of genetically modified (GM) food. In response, DFEH advised that the Administration would focus on the proposed nutrition labelling scheme for the moment as there were established guidelines on nutrition labelling issued by

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internationally recognized institutions. For GM food labelling, a number of technicalities still needed to be sorted out before a concrete proposal on GM food labelling could be formulated.

Policy on avian flu

11.8 Mr Michael MAK noted that the Administration would continue to develop proposals to address the avian flu problem in the coming year. He remarked that the Administration's policy had been unclear and wavering as to whether the introduction of a central slaughtering system for chickens or the segregation of poultry from customers would be the way forward. He urged that the Administration should adopt a clear and consistent policy on the issue.

11.9 Mr Tommy CHEUNG referred to the Administration's plans to commence the air-conditioning retrofitting and general improvement works projects in selected markets in 2004-05, and enquired about the details of the programme for physically segregating the live poultry stalls from the rest of the market and the provision of separate ventilation system(s) for the live poultry zone, as well as the enlargement of live poultry stalls.

11.10 In response, SWHF advised that the Administration had decided that the segregation of poultry from customers at the retail level should be the future direction. The Administration held the view that there was a need to minimize the contact between people and live poultry. As regards the way forward in the long term, the Administration would brief the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on 2 April 2004, the date on which the consultation paper entitled "Prevention of Avian Influenza: Consultation on Long Term Direction to Minimize the Risk of Human Infection" would be released.

Regularization of "private kitchens"

11.11 Mr LEUNG Fu-wah noted that to facilitate the "private kitchen" type of operations, the Administration planned to introduce a new category of licensed food business under which the licensed premises would be required to comply with a number of requirements. He enquired whether a degree of flexibility would be allowed in implementing the requirements, such as relaxing the upper limit of seating capacity of 24 persons if certain conditions were met. He also enquired how the Administration could ensure the safety of food served at these operations without the provision of additional staff resources.

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11.12 In response, DFEH advised that the Administration's current thinking was to fix the seating capacity of this type of operations to not more than 24 persons at any one time, while a degree of flexibility would be allowed for other requirements. All these requirements however would be subject to further deliberations. On the need for additional staff resources, he advised that according to FEHD's assessment, the implementation of the initiative could be absorbed by existing staff.

Food safety and public health

11.13 Mr WONG Yung-kan welcomed the adoption of the "from feed to table" approach by the Administration in enhancing food safety. However, as there was no specific financial provision for this initiative, he was concerned that it would be for the poultry industry to absorb the resource implications of the various food safety control practices to be introduced. In reply, DFEH advised that the Administration had maintained a good working relationship with the poultry industry. Through this and by internal re-organization and job re-engineering, the department would be able to deploy the required resources to oversee the implementation of the "from feed to table" approach in collaboration with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department.

11.14 Mr Albert CHAN noted that the financial provision for the programme area of "food safety and public health" would be reduced by 2.1 % to \$442 million in 2004-05. He questioned how the Administration could achieve its pledge of ensuring that food available for consumption was safe and that public health was safeguarded. In view of the frequent occurrence of food poisoning incidents in fresh vegetables and marine produce, he was concerned whether FEHD had enough manpower resources to conduct tests and inspections on live food animals with the reduced financial provision. Mr Fred LI and Mr LEUNG Fu-wah expressed concern about the recent ciguatera poisoning incidents and urged the Administration to monitor the landing of live marine fish.

11.15 In response, DFEH explained that although the financial provision of \$442 million was 2.1 % lower than the revised estimate for 2003-04, it was 8.7% higher than the original provision for 2003-04. The reduced provision was mainly attributed to the reduction in civil service salaries in 2004-05. DFEH further advised that there was currently no legislation regulating the landing of live marine fish in Hong Kong. As an administrative arrangement, FEHD had advised the trade that coral fish from new fishing areas should be checked for

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ciguatoxin prior to importation to Hong Kong. The laboratory results would normally be known in a week's time. The Administration noted the public's concern that the existing regulatory framework and control should be strengthened and thus had already started the review of the existing legislation. DFEH undertook to report to the relevant Panel when a proposal for the regulatory framework was ready.

Environmental hygiene

11.16 Dr LO Wing-lok noted that some \$2 billion had been spent on public cleansing services in 2003-04. He enquired about the main uses of the sum of money and the reasons for the reduced provision (\$1.7 billion) for 2004-05. In response, DFEH advised that the expenditure on public cleansing services mainly covered refuse collection, street cleansing and public toilet cleansing. The reason for the decrease in provision for the coming year was that certain exceptional cleansing services, such as those for older private buildings, during and in the wake of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak would not be continued in 2004-05.

11.17 Miss CHOY So-yuk noted that of the 90 hygiene blackspots identified by the Team Clean last year, only 11 had been eradicated. She enquired about the reasons for not making specific provision in 2004-05 for the purpose. Mr Michael MAK noted that the Administration had proposed a new prosecution scheme to deal with repeated cleanliness offenders. He was concerned if FEHD had enough manpower for the enforcement work against cleanliness offenders given the reduction in staff establishment.

11.18 In reply, DFEH remarked that in many hygiene blackspots, problems such as those relating to unauthorized building structures had to be resolved through the collaborated efforts of various departments, including the Buildings Department, the Drainage Services Department and the Lands Department. He envisaged that the remaining blackspots could be tackled with the existing resources without specific provision. On the enforcement work against cleanliness offenders, DFEH advised that FEHD had accumulated very good experience for the past nine months since the "zero tolerance" enforcement approach had been adopted and the Police's assistance had been valuable in ensuring that the operation ran smoothly.

Staffing

11.19 Miss CHAN Yuen-han noted the net deletion of 803 non-directorate posts in FEHD in 2004-05 and expressed concern that as a result of the contracting out of the department's services, some existing staff might be made redundant. In reply, DFEH advised that there was no question of deleting posts to pave way for contracting out of services. The deletion of posts was mainly a result of voluntary retirement and natural retirement of staff on reaching their retirement age.

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Health

Long-term healthcare financing

12.2 Miss CHAN Yuen-han enquired about the present position regarding the study on the long-term healthcare financing solution. The Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (PSHWF) advised that the Administration was analyzing findings of the studies on the relevance and suitability of various healthcare financing options and would report the outcome to the Panel on Health Services within this legislative session. In reply to Miss CHAN's question on the need for public consultation, PSHWF said that as the way forward on the long-term healthcare financing option had yet to be decided, it was premature at this stage to provide a timetable for public consultation. She nevertheless assured members that the public would be consulted in this regard.

Department of Health

12.3 Ms LI Fung-ying asked how the Administration could ensure that the reduction in provision for disease prevention in 2004-05 would not affect the service standards of the Department of Health (DH). The Director of Health (D of Health) advised that the reduction was to be achieved through savings measures such as service re-organization, service mode re-engineering and reduction in departmental expenses. By way of illustration, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) would be established in mid-2004. The organizational structure of DH in respect of disease prevention and control would be streamlined so that this programme area would be put under one Controller instead of two Deputy Directors. This would allow work on surveillance and infection control more focused and cost-effective. In the re-engineering exercise, 137 posts would be deleted but 23 new posts, including additional posts in the medical professions, would be created for strengthening disease prevention and control. Hence, the service standard in preventing and controlling communicable diseases should be enhanced. CHP would maintain close liaison with their counterparts in both the Mainland and overseas countries to strengthen communications with these places on disease prevention. The recurrent expenditure of CHP upon full establishment

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would amount to about \$1 billion per year. Apart from public funding, the Hong Kong Jockey Club had also pledged a contribution of \$500 million to support the establishment of CHP.

12.4 Noting that most of CHP staff would be deployed from existing staff of DH, Miss CHAN Yuen-han asked if this would include those who were formerly transferred to HA and had difficulty in adapting to the new working environment. D of Health advised that new staff for CHP should have training in the fighting and prevention of communicable disease as well as working experience in hospital setting. Staff transferred to HA were mainly involved in clinical service and might not have the relevant experience for CHP. He nevertheless would welcome the return of those who were found suitable.

Hospital Authority

12.5 Dr LO Wing-lok recalled that at the briefing by the Financial Secretary on 11 March 2004, members were told that exceptional arrangement had been made for the Hospital Authority (HA) to retain its income from fees and charges collected from medical sources for the provision of health care services. However, it appeared that HA was only allowed to retain half of the accident and emergency (A&E) charges and drug charges. He sought clarification on the discrepancy and whether HA was allowed to retain its non-medical fee income. He also enquired if the exceptional arrangement was going to be permanent. The Chief Executive, Hospital Authority (CE, HA) advised that under the new arrangement, HA was allowed to retain half of the new medical fee income. The exceptional arrangement referred to the retention of the income generated from the increase in existing medical fees and this arrangement was for a finite period. Non-medical fee income, such as rentals from leasing of HA premises, which amounted to some \$215.8 million would all be retained by HA. HA would need to work out with the Administration on the fee income which HA could retain to finance its operation. PSHWF added that the exceptional arrangement would continue subject to a review to be conducted in due course.

12.6 Mr Michael MAK noted that the introduction of A&E service charge had been able to reduce indiscriminate use of the service on the one hand and generate income for HA on the other. He asked whether consideration would be given to reviewing the overall fee structure according to affordability. In response, SHWF confirmed that affordability would be taken into account in determining the fee levels. Efforts would also be made to ensure that subsidy

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from the public purse could be better targeted through more cost-effective medical services. The long-term solution would be the establishment of a health plan.

12.7 Dr LAW Chi-kwong queried the substantial difference in drug expenditure between the Hong Kong East & Hong Kong West Clusters of \$475 million and the New Territories West Cluster (NTWC) of \$173 million given the similar size of population in these clusters. CE, HA explained that the expenditure of drugs of the hospitals in Hong Kong East and West included the Queen Mary Hospital which provided more specialized services such as liver, bone marrow, heart/lung transplant, cancer and special paediatric services, which often involved prolonged use of expensive drugs. SHWF supplemented that the expenditure of drugs for different clusters was not necessarily directly proportionate to the size of their population. Owing to varying factors, such as work locations or the relatively fewer number of hospitals in NTWC, many residents in NTWC were patronizing medical services in other hospital clusters. The nature of services provided by individual clusters was a more crucial factor attributing to the magnitude of their drug cost. Dr LAW asked how HA could ensure equitable allocation of resources to different hospitals from a management point of view. CE, HA advised that directors of clusters would take into the circumstances of individual hospitals in the allocation of funding within their envelopes.

12.8 Mr Albert CHAN remained concerned about the inadequate level of medical service in NTW. The remoteness of the region also rendered it not possible for residents to travel to the urban area to seek medical attention, particularly in the event of emergency. The situation would be further aggravated following the funding cut of 4.8% for the health sector in 2004-05. To this end, effort should be made to provide more integrated and cost-effective medical services to NTW. CE, HA advised that in line with the population-based funding mechanism adopted by the Government, HA had implemented a population-based internal resource allocation system commencing 2003/04. This system aimed to provide an equitable allocation of resources to different clusters taking into account the residential population of the clusters, service needs of the cluster population and cross-cluster utilization of services. In 2003/04 and 2004/05, HA had allocated more resources to NTWC for expanding and developing its services in order to cope with the growing service demand of its population.

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12.9 At members' request, the Administration undertook to provide details on the difference in expenditure on drugs between the Hong Kong East and Hong Kong West Clusters and NTWC and to advise how HA could ensure equitable allocation of resources to NTWC to maintain its level of service to the public.

12.10 Mr TAM Yiu-chung asked whether consideration would be given to providing 24-hour outpatient service in Tung Chung. CE, HA advised that HA had only taken over all General Outpatient Clinics from the Department of Health for a short time. It would keep in view the level of service to ascertain the need for enhancement. For Tung Chung, in view of the steady growth in population, consideration was being given to building a hospital in North Lantau Island subject to the availability of site.

12.11 Noting that the present demand for healthcare service was greater than that for curative service, Dr LAW Chi-kwong questioned why there was an increase in the number of doctors but a decrease in the case of nurses. CE, HA explained that HA had the obligation to provide clinical training to medical graduates for six to seven years. There was a higher demand for doctors recently in light of the increased trend for specialization. While some of the graduates would be retained by HA to fill the new posts or some of the vacancies arising from the implementation of the voluntary retirement scheme, those who could not be absorbed by HA would have to leave. He added that while there was an overall drop in establishment in HA, particularly in the management level, 400 additional nurses would be recruited next year. Arrangement had also been made to deploy healthcare assistants to take up healthcare work in wards so that professionally trained nurses could be released to carry out more demanding tasks. In general, the number of nurses amounted to nearly 40% of the total establishment of staff in HA.

Prince Philip Dental Hospital

12.12 In response to Dr LO Wing-lok's enquiry about the financing arrangement for certain directorate staff in Prince Philip Dental Hospital (PPDH), PSHWF explained that a senior executive of HA was seconded to PPDH and the remuneration was funded by HWFB. SHWF added that the Director of PPDH, who was also Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry of the University of Hong Kong, was on the full-time payroll of the University of Hong Kong. At members'

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request, the Administration undertook to provide details of the personal emoluments of directorate grade staff of PPDH.

Influenza vaccination programme

12.13 Noting that the vaccination programme for elderly homes in 2003 was proved to be effective in controlling the spread of influenza, Mr Jasper TSANG asked if similar programme would continue in 2004. D of Health advised that vaccination was not 100% effective in preventing the outbreak of influenza. Under the regular influenza vaccination programme of DH, free influenza vaccination was provided annually for elderly residents of residential care homes and long-stay residents of institutions for the mentally and physically disabled where the risk of infection of influenza illness was relatively high. For the influenza season in 2003-04, the Advisory Committee on Immunization (ACI) had further recommended that influenza vaccination be extended to cover healthcare workers and poultry workers with a view to preventing clinical confusion with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and possible genetic reassortment of avian influenza with other influenza virus. ACI would take into account the prevailing situation in deciding the need for the vaccination programme on a year by year basis. CE, HA supplemented that HA had also reviewed its vaccination programme and decided that long-stay patients with chronic illness and frontline workers should receive vaccination in 2004-05.

12.14 Mr Jasper TSANG asked if consideration would be given to extending the vaccination programme to school children who were also vulnerable to influenza illness. D of Health advised that apart from vaccination, promotion of personal hygiene was a more effective means to prevent the spread of influenza among school children.

Prevention of smoking

12.15 Mr Michael MAK noted that there was a growing trend of smoking among youth and women and enquired about the rationale behind the trend. Expressing similar concern, Mr LEUNG Fu-wah asked how the Administration would deal with such a problem. SHWF advised that the growing trend might be attributed to the promotion of smoking as trendy by cigarette manufacturers. To tackle the problem, the Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health had an outreaching team which would visit schools to educate teenagers about the hazards of smoking in the form of dramas which was proved to be a success. Publicity,

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including Announcement of Public Interest, would be stepped up to promote public awareness of the hazards of smoking.

12.16 Mr Michael MAK further enquired about the legislative time-table to ban smoking in all restaurants. D of Health advised that the related proposal would be submitted to the Legislature for consideration in the next legislative session. Meanwhile, efforts would be made to curb smoking. The Tobacco Control Office would continue to assist restaurateurs in enforcing the existing legislation against smoking in food premises and to promote no smoking offices.

Chinese medicine services

12.17 Dr TANG Siu-tong enquired about the lead time for the registration of proprietary Chinese medicines (PCM) and whether the Administration would fully recoup the cost incurred. D of Health said that the registration work was a mammoth task given that there were 6 000 to 10 000 PCM in the market. At present, 34.5 full-time equivalent staff were working on the job. Mainland experts also assisted in the processing work. It was estimated that about 6 000 applications for registration would be processed in the first year. The lead time for registration would be shorter for more common types of prescriptions. He added that the Administration would only recover 25% of the cost incurred.

12.18 Miss CHAN Yuen-han enquired about the progress in the provision of Chinese medicine outpatient clinics. CE, HA said that at present, there were three Chinese medicine outpatient clinics opened in HA which were supported by funding from this particular programme. HA would review the effectiveness of these clinics scheme before deciding on the way forward.

Welfare

12.19 Mr Albert CHAN noticed the 26.3% downward adjustment in the financial provision for the Social Welfare Programme under the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) for 2004-05 as compared to the revised estimate for 2003-04. He was concerned about the impact of the reduction on the Bureau's provision of services to assist the vulnerable groups, in particular those living in New Territories West such as Tin Shui Wai and Tuen Mun, where family problems and youth problems were serious. The Director of Social Welfare (DSW) responded that like other Government departments, HWFB and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) had to help solve the Government's deficit problem.

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The savings were to a large extent attributable to the civil service pay cut, efficiency savings and other “one-off” expenditures not envisaged in 2004-05. Provision for extension of temporary posts for one year as recently approved by the Finance Committee was also not included in SWD’s estimate. Notwithstanding this, the provision of a safety net for the financially vulnerable and the financial provision for social security would not be affected. In fact, new funding amounting to \$100 million would be set aside for further development of services for the elderly and the total provision for SWD in 2004-05 was higher as compared to the 2003-04 revised estimate.

12.20 Mr Albert CHAN remained concerned about the chain effect arising from a reduced budget for welfare services in that child problem would develop into youth problem which would then turn into family problem or social problem. In reply, DSW said that the implementation of integrated family services centres was meant to address the member’s concern. The resources for family services would be utilized in a more effective manner by better redeployment among the 13 service districts taking into account objective data, such as population and income distribution, and the advice of District Social Welfare Officers who were familiarized with the characteristics of individual districts. Resources would be deployed to the most needed areas.

12.21 Miss CHAN Yuen-han referred to the Chief Executive’s pledge in the 2004 Policy Address to help poor people and to improve their economic situation. She was disappointed to find that no provision was set aside for examining concrete measures to combat poverty. DSW said that the issue of poverty had recently been discussed by the Panel on Welfare Services in January 2004. SWD would conduct a review of the various schemes to help recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) to secure jobs and become self-reliant, which was the ultimate aim of the CSSA Scheme. As the review would only involve a small amount of resources, there was no need for a specific provision. In response to Miss CHAN’s enquiry on the timetable for the review, DSW said that SWD was identifying a suitable organization to conduct the review. It was expected that the review would start in one to two months’ time and the results would be made available in 2004-05. Details of the review and the results would be reported to the Panel on Welfare Services.

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Social Security

12.22 Miss CHOY So-yuk called upon the Administration to consider extending the Portable CSSA Scheme to other provinces in China in addition to Guangdong. SHWF said that the Administration would review the viability of extending the Portable CSSA to cover more provinces. On Miss CHOY's request for waiving the residence requirement of 180 days in Hong Kong for eligibility for the Old Age Allowance, SHWF replied that the Administration had no plan to waive the residence requirement.

12.23 Mr LEE Cheuk-yan noted that the Housing Authority (HGA) had recently proposed to waive CSSA households for payment of rent for public rental housing. If the proposal was adopted, the expenditure of SWD would be drastically reduced. Should this be the case, it might not be necessary to reduce payments under the CSSA Scheme. He enquired if SWD would seek more resources from the Administration for social service programmes.

12.24 In response, DSW said that SWD was discussing with HGA on the latter's rent reduction proposal and the financial implications had yet to be assessed. However, from the perspective of the whole Government, waiver of rent for CSSA households should not be regarded as savings because HGA would receive less rent. He reiterated that the provision for social security would not be affected. All along HWFB and SWD were striving to get the required resources for social welfare services, such as the new \$100 million fund for the development of long-term services for the elderly.

12.25 Mr WONG Sing-chi noted that of the 1 530 established CSSA fraud cases, only 198 had been successfully prosecuted. He enquired about the resources which had been put into the investigation of fraud cases and questioned the cost-effectiveness of investigating and prosecuting CSSA recipients. The Assistant Director for Social Welfare (Social Security) (ADSW(SS)) replied that the Government had pledged to the public that it would investigate every case quickly to establish if there was a substantiated case or not. Of the 15 573 fraud cases reported in the past five years, most of them lacked specific details. The Special Investigation Section (SIS) of SWD therefore did not spend much time on these cases. Cost-effectiveness had always been the prime objective of SIS. The total operating cost of SIS during the past financial year was \$40 million, but it had successfully identified CSSA overpayment of \$60 million. The number of prosecution cases was small as SWD wanted to ensure that only those cases which

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had a high chance of conviction would be referred to the Police for prosecution. SWD also followed the guidelines it had agreed with the Police and the Department of Justice on genuine mitigating factors in determining whether a case should be referred for prosecution or not. Nevertheless, the increase in successful cases had sent out a clear message to CSSA recipients that SWD would seriously deal with fraud cases, and that these cases would be found out, and the relevant recipients might face imprisonment if convicted. CSSA fraud was a complicated issue and SWD would conduct a review of the subject later.

12.26 In response to Mr WONG Sing-chi's enquiry on how the remaining established CSSA fraud cases which were not prosecuted were handled, ADSW(SS) said that the majority of them were still investigated by the Police. As SWD had built up more cases in the recent past, more time was needed by the Police to complete the investigation. It was expected that more cases would be prosecuted.

12.27 Mr TAM Yiu-chung noted that the projected number of two categories of CSSA cases, namely "single parent family" and "low earnings", showed a big increase of 9.7% and 22.6% respectively in 2004-05 as compared to the 2003-04 figures. He enquired about the reasons for the projected increase. DSW replied that the figures were projected based on the growth trends of these two categories in the past two years. ADSW(SS) supplemented that the projected number of cases were worked out by a team of statisticians based on the past growth trends. The increase in "single parent family" cases was attributed to a higher divorce rate and more split-up families with the mothers remaining in the Mainland but the children staying in Hong Kong. Five years ago, 20% of single parent families was on CSSA and presently the figure rose to 41%. Split-up families constituted about 25% of single parent family cases. With the rebound of Hong Kong's economy in recent months, CSSA unemployment cases remained stable. However, some people still earned a low income which was not sufficient to meet the basic need. Thus, these people who previously received CSSA under the "unemployment" category would receive the "low earnings" CSSA instead.

12.28 Mr LEE Cheuk-yan stressed that the projected increase in the "low earnings" cases was true in a sense that CSSA had become a means of Government subsidy to employers who deliberately suppressed wages, knowing that employees could receive CSSA under the "low earnings" category. In response, DSW said that many of those who were unemployed previously were able to get a job although wages were low and they might need to apply for low

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earnings CSSA. With improvement in the local economy, it was hoped that wages would increase. Mr LEE did not agree and said that improved economy did not bring about improvement in wages. He enquired if the Administration would consider introducing a minimum wage policy to deter abusive use of “low earnings” CSSA by employers. In response, DSW said that the issue of minimum wage was not under the purview of SWD. The issue was controversial and different views had been expressed in the Legislative Council. He considered it inappropriate to link up the issue with “low earnings” CSSA.

12.29 In this respect, Mrs Sophie LEUNG opined that it was an inevitable trend that local wages would get going down in order to maintain competitiveness with the neighbouring areas, otherwise more businesses would be forced to close down. The Administration should bring out the issue for comprehensive discussion by the community at large. In response, DSW agreed that the minimum wages policy was a broad issue which should not be discussed from the perspective of social security alone.

Services for the elderly

12.30 Mr TAM Yiu-chung noted that the utilization rates for the Enhanced Home and Community Care Services (EHCCS) and the Integrated Home Care Services (IHCS) were both less than 75%. He was concerned about the low utilization rates and enquired if these were related to the contents of the services and if additional publicity work was needed. In response, the Assistant Director for Social Welfare (Elderly) explained that the lower utilization was brought down by the additional 1 120 places created last year in the new Integrated Home Care Services Team to serve frail elders. DSW supplemented that the wide range of care and support services were able to meet the multifarious needs of the frail elders. Service providers were also undertaking publicity work to introduce these services to the elderly. With the implementation of the computerized central waiting list for long-term care services in November 2003, those elders who were in need of long-term care services and preferred to live in the community could receive community care services such as EHCCS or IHCS after standardized care need assessment. It was envisaged that the demand for these services would increase.

12.31 Referring to the decrease in the estimated unit cost of the day care centres for the elderly in 2004-05, Mr LEUNG Fu-wah enquired whether this was partly attributable to fee charging by the centres. In response, DSW replied that

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under the lump-sum grant system, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had more flexibility in deploying resources and surplus could be kept by NGOs for their long-term development.

Rehabilitation and Medical Social Services

12.32 In response to Mr WONG Sing-chi's enquiry about the medical social services during the extended service hours currently implemented in six major hospitals, the Assistant Director for Social Welfare (Rehabilitation and Medical Social Services) (ADSW(RM)) said that the total number of interviews conducted and enquiries received during normal hours at the 18 hospitals were about 130 000 and 170 000 per year respectively. These compared with the 1 250 interview cases and 1 800 enquiries received in extended service hours during the past 11 months. With 18 social workers deployed at each hospital, two to three social workers would station during the extended hours on a roster basis to provide services.

12.33 Noting the relatively small number of interviews and enquiries during the extended hours, Mr WONG Sing-chi queried whether the resources had been best utilized. ADSW(RM) emphasized that the effectiveness of services should not be assessed on the utilization rate alone. It was important that patients and their families were provided with timely assistance. Timely referral to appropriate organizations was also important. The extended hours services would provide convenience to patients and their families to approach medical social workers for urgent services. Where necessary, medical social workers would conduct interviews/home visits during lunch or after office hours.

Women's Interests

12.34 In response to Miss CHAN Yuen-han's question on different pay for men and women for equal work, the Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Women) (DS(Women)) said that as at the last quarter of 2003, the median income of female workers in Hong Kong was \$9,000 as compared with \$11,000 for male workers. However, many factors such as experience, work types, ranking, and working hours could account for the difference. As such, it would be difficult to draw a conclusion that the difference in pay between male and female workers was due to sex discrimination. Complaints about sex discrimination could be lodged with the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), as sex discrimination was prohibited by law under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 480).

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12.35 Miss CHAN Yuen-han was surprised that the Administration was not even aware of the wide-spread phenomenon of sex discrimination in pay. She said that many researches had been done on the subject, including one conducted by the Legislative Council Secretariat. Moreover, the existing Sex Discrimination Ordinance did not include provisions prohibiting different pay for equal work. SHWF responded that EOC had conducted a study on equal pay for equal value of work. It was observed that there were difficulties in identifying occupational groups for comparison. The Administration was ready to discuss the matter further with the Panel on Welfare Services if required.

12.36 Ms LI Fung-ying enquired about the progress of introduction of the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist to policy areas and implementation of the Gender Focal Points Network within the Administration. In response, DS(Women) said that every policy bureau and department had designated an officer at directorate rank as Gender Focal Point to act as liaison person with the Women's Commission. The Gender Mainstreaming Checklist had been implemented for two years. The Checklist was pilot tested in 2002 in five policy areas, namely, the District Council Review, Family Life Education Programme, Health Care Reform, Enhanced Home and Community Care Services for the Elderly, and Secondary School Places Allocation System. Based on the feedback from the pilot test participants and other relevant parties, the Checklist was refined and finalized in 2003. In 2003, the Checklist was introduced in three policy areas, including review of the role and functions of public sector advisory and statutory bodies as well as women's participation in advisory and statutory bodies, information technology education and training for the community, and design of facilities in public buildings. In 2004, the Checklist would be extended to two more policy areas. These were public toilets under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and major promotional campaigns under the Information Services Department. Ms LI requested and the Administration undertook to provide members with a list of contact persons of the Gender Focal Points Network.

Young People

12.37 Ms LI Fung-ying was concerned about the rising youth crime and enquired if there were any guidelines on the programmes at Integrated Children and Youth Services Centre run by NGOs to attract youth at risk. DSW pointed out that there were dedicated outreach social work teams to provide services to young people at risk and other youths respectively. Although the focus in service

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provision was different, the teams complemented each other. He agreed with Ms LI that prevention was better than cure and in this respect, the Understanding the Adolescent Project was aimed at identifying the developmental needs of young people with a screening tool for timely intervention at secondary schools.

Deletion of posts in SWD

12.38 Miss CHAN Yuen-han enquired about how a net decrease of 133 non-directorate permanent posts in SWD could be achieved in 2004-05. In response, DSW replied that the reduction was achieved mainly through voluntary retirement and natural wastage. SWD would redeploy staff who were affected by the organizational restructuring within the department, taking into account their specialty and expertise. The aim was that there would be no redundancy. Referring to the deletion of 28 Senior Social Work Assistant and 38 Social Work Assistant posts, DSW supplemented that these posts were deleted as a result of voluntary retirement and natural wastage. DSW assured Miss CHAN that there was no question of redundancy of posts which were involved in direct provision of services.