

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)3172/05-06
(These minutes have been
seen by the Administration)

Ref: CB2/PL/WS

Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of meeting
held on Monday, 10 July 2006 at 10:45 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building

- Members present** : Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung (Chairman)
Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Bernard CHAN, GBS, JP
Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG LAU Yau-fun, SBS, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, BBS, JP
Hon Albert CHAN Wai-yip
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, SBS, JP
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung
- Member absent** : Hon James TIEN Pei-chun, GBS, JP
- Public Officers attending** : Item II
- Ms Linda LAI
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Family and Women)
- Ms Wendy CHEUNG
Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Welfare) 3

Items II to IV

Mr Freely CHENG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and
Food (Family)

Mr FUNG Pak-yan
Assistant Director for Social Welfare (Development)

Items III & IV

Miss Annie KONG
Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Family) 2

Mr FU Tsun-hung
Chief Social Work Officer (Subventions)
Social Welfare Department

**Deputations
by invitation**

: Items II to IV

Social Welfare Organizations Employees Union

Mr LIU Wai-ying
Chairperson

St James' Settlement

Mr Alfred CHENG
Senior Manager (System and Finance)

Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
Committee of Public Services (Social Services)

Mr TANG Wai-wah
Convenor

Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union

Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che
President

Staff Association of Hong Kong Young Women
Christian Association

Mr TSE Sai-kit
President

Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Ms Christine FANG
Chief Executive

Items II and III

The Hong Kong Social Workers Association

Mr CHUA Hoi-wai
President

Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Ms Jane TSEUI
Business Director

The Hong Kong Society for the Aged

Mr TIK Chi-yuen
Director

Community Care and Nursing Home Workers
General Union

Mr CHENG Ching-fat
Exco Member

Item IV

The Church of United Brethren in Christ Whampoa
Integrated Children and Youth Service Centre

Mr HO Siu-kei
Social Worker

**Clerk in
attendance**

: Ms Doris Chan
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance

: Item I

Mr Watson CHAN
Head, Research and Library Services

Mr Thomas WONG
Research Officer 4

All items

Mr Chris LAI
Senior Council Secretary (2) 7

Miss Maggie CHIU
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

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I. Proposed research outline on child protection in selected overseas places
(LC Paper No. CB(2)2666/05-06(01))

At the invitation of the Chairman, Head (Research and Library Services Division) (H(RL)) briefed members on the proposed research outline on child protection policies and measures in England in the United Kingdom, Ontario in Canada and New South Wales in Australia prepared by the Research and Library Services Division of the Legislative Council (LegCo) Secretariat. H(RL) said that the research would be completed by October/November 2006. Members endorsed the proposed outline of study.

II. Social welfare planning mechanism: report of the annual consultation session with the welfare sector for priorities in 2007-08 and beyond on 23 June 2006
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)2655/05-06(01) and CB(2)2707/05-06(01))

2. Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Family and Women) (DSHWF(F&W)) briefed members the outcome of the annual consultation session with the welfare sector for priorities in 2007-08 and beyond held on 23 June 2006, details of which were set out in the Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)2655/05-06(01)). She pointed out that welfare planning was a long and complex process involving many parties. The annual consultation sessions were just part of that process, and they were not the only occasion to

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solicit views from the welfare sector. The Administration would continue to use other channels to collect views from the sector.

Views of deputations

Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) Committee of Public Services (Social Services)

3. Mr TANG Wai-wai expressed disappointment that staff representatives of subvented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing welfare services were not involved in the consultation sessions and their voices could not be heard.

Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union

4. Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che was of the view that priorities of social welfare services should be set under a forward-looking framework of long-term strategic visions, based on consultations with stakeholders, including frontline social workers, business sectors and service users. He criticized the Administration's reluctance to formulate a long-term development plan of social welfare services through wide consultations with relevant parties.

Staff Association of Hong Kong Young Women Christian Association (HKYWCA)

5. Mr TSE Sai-kit was disappointed that the Government had abandoned the previous planning mechanism in the form of a long-term plan. Social welfare policies had become resource-driven and only responded to changing circumstances in a piecemeal manner. He also expressed dismay that the Government was selective in soliciting views from relevant parties on welfare planning.

The Hong Kong Social Workers' Association

6. Mr CHUA Hoi-wai said that without a long-term development plan, the social welfare sector and the community were unable to set the priorities of welfare services. This also resulted in the public's unrealistic expectations of social workers, mistakenly believing that they could render services to all needy in the society. In the Tin Shui Wai suicide incident involving three women with a history of mental illnesses, there were voices blaming the social workers for their failure to identify the case prior to the outbreak of the incident. However, the wide gap between the number of mental outpatients (estimated to be around 80 000 to 100 000) and the capacity of welfare services for mental outpatients (around 6 000 to 7 000 users) was not understood by the public.

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The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS)
(LC Paper No. CB(2)2707/05-06(01))

7. Ms Christine FANG presented the views of HKCSS as set out in its submission and highlighted the following points –

- (a) while she welcomed the Administration's initiative in establishing the annual consultation mechanisms in planning the provision of social welfare services, the Administration should also draw up an integrated and forward-looking planning framework, based on discussions with all relevant parties, to provide the public with a vision on the development of social services;
- (b) the Administration should set out a timetable for formulating medium-term plans of three to five years for individual programme areas. In this regard, reference could be made to the 2005 Rehabilitation Programme Plan Review, during which the Administration had adopted a partnership approach in the numerous discussions and consultations with stakeholders; and
- (c) central planning of social welfare services should take into account the local needs and specific issues at district level. To facilitate the district planning process, the Administration should provide NGOs with detailed analyses of the needs of different districts in respect of social welfare services.

The Hong Kong Society for the Aged (SAGE)

8. Mr TIK Chi-yuen was of the view that even if consultations had been made with stakeholders, the Administration had yet to put in place a long-term plan to direct and guide the development of social welfare services. He was dissatisfied that the present planning mechanism could not address the needs of the elderly in the long run, as there would be a rapid increase in the ageing population over the next 30 years. He pointed out that the existing services were inadequate to meet the needs of the elderly, as evidenced by the long waiting lists for elderly homes. The Administration's piecemeal and short-sighted approach to welfare planning could not help alleviate the problems facing the vulnerable members of the society, especially the elderly.

Community Care and Nursing Home Workers General Union

9. Mr CHENG Ching-fat pointed out that elderly care homes were seriously understaffed, which resulted in heavy workload of staff and rising cases of work injuries. The high turnover rate and low morale of frontline staff, as well as the increasing number of contract staff who worried about their service continuity would inevitably have an adverse impact on the service quality of elderly care

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homes. The Administration should expeditiously conduct a comprehensive review on the issues of human resource development in the elderly services and come up with a solution.

The Administration's response

10. DSHWF(F&W) responded as follows –

- (a) the difficulties faced by operators of residential care homes for the elderly in recruiting and retaining experienced nursing staff and the work injuries of welfare workers had been raised in the annual consultation sessions. The Administration was proposing measures to alleviate these manpower problems and to enhance the competence of welfare workers through training;
- (b) having regard to the time constraints and the need to facilitate exchange of views, the annual consultation sessions could not involve a large number of participants. Although staff representatives of NGOs had not been invited, their views could be reflected by the representatives of their organisations. The Administration was considering other arrangements to gauge the views of staff representatives and labour unions of NGOs;
- (c) when mapping out the longer-term plan for social welfare services, the Administration engaged in regular dialogues with the relevant advisory bodies such as the Elderly Commission and Social Welfare Advisory Committee. The Administration shared the deputations' view on the merit of a wider consultative network and would consider other channels to gauge views;
- (d) as regards the high public expectations and the pressure of such expectations on social workers, the community as a whole needed to be realistic in their expectations and appreciate the many constraints faced by social workers. The Administration encouraged the use of community resources and voluntary support network to tackle the increasing complexity of social problems, which could help alleviate the heavy workload faced by welfare workers; and
- (e) the Administration believed that the terms of employment would not affect the devotion and professionalism of social workers. Irrespective of their terms of employment, the Administration believed that social workers would try their best to provide the best services to the needy. The Administration had also adopted various measures to enhance staff consultations and corporate governance of NGOs.

Discussion

11. Miss CHAN Yuen-han expressed dissatisfaction that the Administration had turned a deaf ear to numerous requests from the welfare sector for a blueprint on the long-term development of social welfare services in the form of a 10-year White Paper. She pointed out that social welfare services were badly in need of strategic planning for revamping the services to address the economic and social problems emerging after 1997, such as structural unemployment, ageing population and widening disparity between the rich and the poor. Miss CHAN noted that although an additional \$20 million had been earmarked annually from this financial year onward to strengthen home care services for the elderly, little discussions had been made with the welfare sector on how to make the best use of the additional resource. Miss CHAN urged the Administration to consult the relevant parties when setting the priorities of social services so that the limited welfare resources could be spent on the most needed areas.

12. DSHWF(F&W) responded that the Administration would adopt different planning mechanisms for different service areas, having regard to the individual needs and situation of each service area. Where the circumstances required, as in the case of rehabilitation service, the Administration had worked out a Rehabilitation Programme Plan to meet the long-term needs of people with disabilities.

13. Dr YEUNG Sum recommended the Administration to strengthen its communications and collaboration with NGOs which played an important role in provision of welfare services. He also asked whether consideration would be given by the Administration to –

- (a) setting up a standing committee comprising stakeholders from the welfare sector to advise the Administration on the long-term planning of social welfare services through regular dialogues;
- (b) preparing consultation papers on significant social welfare policies in the form of Green Paper and White Paper; and
- (c) setting priorities for social welfare services for the next five to 10 years based on comprehensive consultations with stakeholders and evidence-based research.

14. DSHWF(F&W) responded as follows –

- (a) the Administration attached great importance to the communications and collaboration with NGOs. Nevertheless, careful deliberations needed to be made on whether to put in place a standing committee in addition to the existing advisory

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mechanisms to advise the Administration on its welfare planning;

- (b) the consultation approach in the form of Green Paper and White Paper would be considered if the policy issue was of great significance to the society as a whole; and
- (c) the existing budgetary arrangements made it difficult for the Administration to engage in a long-term plan setting out the priorities in a specific policy area for the next five to 10 years.

15. Ms LI Fung-ying urged the Administration to draw up a blueprint to guide the long-term development of welfare services in response to emerging social issues. She asked the Administration to give reasons for not doing so. In response, DSHWF(F&W) said that the Administration would formulate a longer-term plan for a specific service area, as in the case of rehabilitation service the demand of which was relatively stable and enduring. For other areas such as youth services and family services, the Administration would adopt a more flexible approach so that the services could respond to the fast-changing needs. In respect of elderly services, the Elderly Commission was having discussions to map out the longer-term plan for services to elderly.

16. Ms LI Fung-ying expressed disappointment that the Administration did not undertake to formulate a long-term plan of social welfare services. She pointed out that in view of our ageing population, the demand for elderly services was clearly on the increase, and there was a strong case for mapping out a blueprint of elderly service provision for the years to come.

17. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan shared Mr TIK Chi-yuen's view that the Administration's paper did not set out any strategic visions and long-term planning of social welfare services. He was of the view that the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) attached greater importance to health services than welfare services, as reflected by the infrequency of Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) and Permanent Secretary for Health and Welfare attending the meetings of this Panel. Mr LEE pointed out that under the existing budgetary arrangement, the Administration was not able to undertake a long-term planning of policy areas since budgetary provision was usually confined to the expenditure for the coming year. In his opinion, this greatly hampered the sustainable development of social welfare services.

18. DSHWF(F&W) responded that the Administration's paper summarized the outcome of annual consultation sessions with the welfare sector, whereas the strategic planning of welfare services was set out in the annual Policy Address and Policy Agenda. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan pointed out that the annual Policy Address and Policy Agenda were only confined to planning for the next year, which reflected the Administration's short-sightedness in social welfare planning.

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19. Mr Albert CHAN expressed dissatisfaction with the Administration's bureaucratic and indifferent approach to planning and provision of social welfare services. He pointed out that the elderly suicide rate in Hong Kong was higher than that of western countries, indicating that the Administration's policy had failed to adequately address elderly needs. He was also disappointed that the Administration had abandoned the previous planning mechanism in the form of a five-year or 10-year plan, which was well-received by the welfare sector and the community, and asked if the Administration would reinstate the previous practice.

20. In response, DSHWF(F&W) disagreed that the Administration was bureaucratic and indifferent to emerging social issues. On the contrary, it had kept a close eye on the social problems and adopted a flexible approach to solving them. On the elderly suicide problem, with the efforts of the Administration and NGOs, there was a decrease in the elderly suicide rate last year.

21. Mr Albert CHAN criticized the Administration's reluctance to adopt a long-term plan for the development of social welfare policies, which was widely adopted by many governments including the Central People's Government. He said that even if a long-term plan had been laid down, adjustments to the plan could still be made where necessary in response to changing circumstances. DSHWF(F&W) responded that in the light of the current situation, a flexible approach in welfare planning was more suitable to Hong Kong.

22. Mr Albert HO said that while the Administration attached great importance to the sustainable development of Hong Kong, little had been done on mapping out a blueprint for long-term development of social welfare services. This reflected the Administration's lack of visions and commitment in welfare policies. Mr HO further asked the Administration whether all major policy planning had been put on hold because there was only one year before the end of the current term of office of the Chief Executive.

23. DSHWF(F&W) responded that the Administration had introduced new philosophy and strategies, such as cross-sectoral collaboration and community involvement to tackle the increasingly complex social issues. However, the Administration was of the view that social welfare planning in the form of service projection in detailed figures was no longer suitable to the present situation of Hong Kong. Where justified, a longer-term plan would still be developed for a specific service area, whereas for other areas, the Administration would adopt a more flexible planning approach.

24. Mr Albert HO pointed out that the Administration had been studying new financing options for health services to address the increasing demand by an ageing population. However, it had yet to come up with a long-term plan for

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social welfare services in the face of an ageing population. DSHWF(F&W) responded that health services and welfare services were two entirely different areas, and they were not strictly comparable. When deliberating on the resource allocation, the Administration needed to ensure all the public money were spent in a prudent manner.

25. Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that the Administration should plan ahead on how to tackle the complex issues arising from the ageing population and structural unemployment before they became severe social problems. She further asked if the Administration had taken into account the requests raised by members and deputations for a long-term development plan for welfare policies.

26. Dr YEUNG Sum pointed out that a major proportion of social welfare expenditures had been spent on social security, which reflected that the Administration had not attached much importance to welfare services. He said that even if the Administration believed that the previous practice of welfare planning was no longer viable in view of the present situation of Hong Kong, long-term planning was still required for the development of welfare services. He urged the Administration to adopt the approach of a medium-term development plan of three to five years in the form of a consultation paper, based on stakeholders' views solicited from standing committees and evidence-based research.

27. DSHWF(F&W) responded that complex social issues including ageing population and structural unemployment straddled different policy bureaux and departments. In respect of ageing population, HWFB primarily focused on the provision of elderly services. She clarified that contrary to what had been said by the members, the Elderly Commission had played an important role in advising the Administration on the strategic development of elderly services and in conducting relevant topical research. She further said that excluding the expenditures on social security, the Administration had in fact been expanding the social welfare expenditures over the past years, which reflected the Administration's commitment to welfare services despite financial stringency in recent years. The Administration would also take heed of all the views given by members and deputations at this meeting.

28. The Chairman was dissatisfied with the Administration's response. He suggested and members agreed to –

Admin (a) request the Administration to provide a paper setting out the whole process and timetable of its social welfare planning mechanism; and

Admin (b) request SHWF to attend future meetings of the Panel which involved discussions on long-term planning of welfare services.

III. Validity of the 9.3% reduction from the Benchmark Salary of non-governmental organizations on the lump sum grant as a result of the Enhanced Productivity Programme and Efficiency Savings

(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)2636/05-06(01), CB(2)2666/05-06(02), CB(2)2707/05-06(02) and LS90/05-06)

29. Members noted the content of the Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)2636/05-06(01)) which set out its response on the validity of the 9.3% reduction from the Benchmark Salary of NGOs on the lump sum grant (LSG) as a result of the Enhanced Productivity Programme (EPP) and Efficiency Savings (ES) and the observations on the Administration's response prepared by Legal Services Division of the LegCo Secretariat (LC Paper No. LS90/05-06).

Views of deputations

St James' Settlement

(LC Paper No. CB(2)2666/05-06(02))

30. Mr Alfred CHENG said that many NGOs had been under financial pressure since changing over to the LSG subventions system, especially having regard to the 9.3% reduction as a result of the EPP and ES. The reduction in financial resources had resulted in manpower problems faced by NGOs, which would adversely affect the quality of their service.

HKCTU Committee of Public Services (Social Services)

31. Mr TANG Wai-wah pointed out that frontline staff of NGOs, especially those on contract terms, had poor morale, as they were often the targets of the management to slash costs. Job insecurity, excessive workload and heavy work pressure upon transition to the LSG subventions system also brought an increase in the number of work injuries in the welfare sector. He disagreed with the Administration that there was a decreasing trend in the figures of work injuries. To his knowledge, there were cases where the social workers were asked by the management not to report work injuries, and these workers were afraid to say no for the fear of losing their jobs.

Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union

32. Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che was of the view that under the LSG subventions system, NGOs had to resort to reduce staff salaries and lay off staff to save costs. Whereas government departments could implement voluntary retirement schemes and outsourcing of services to achieve the targets of EPP and ES, NGOs of smaller scale would not find these methods viable. The deterioration in the terms of service had resulted in high staff turnover and brain drain in the social welfare sector.

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Staff Association of HKYWCA

33. Mr TSE Sai-kit said that the social welfare sector had clearly voiced out their opposition to the implementation of LSG subventions system and 9.3% reduction as result of EPP and ES. Although the Administration had stated in its paper that NGOs had joined the LSG voluntarily, in fact NGOs had no choice but to accept in order to continue their service provision.

The Hong Kong Social Workers' Association

34. Mr CHUA Hoi-wai was of the view that both the Administration's response and observations made by Legal Services Division of LegCo Secretariat had not answered clearly whether the deduction of 9.3% from the Benchmark Salary of NGOs on LSG amounted to a breach of contractual obligation. He said that while NGOs had indicated acceptance of LSG subvention system, they had never accepted the 9.3% reduction from the Benchmark Salary. Mr CHUA further said that some NGOs had achieved cost savings through in-situ expansion of existing services. In other words, these NGOs were required to achieve savings of more than the target of 9.3% reduction.

HKCSS

(LC Paper No. CB(2)2707/05-06(02))

35. Ms Christine FANG said that NGOs had made known to the Administration their financial difficulties upon transition to the LSG subventions system. She pointed out that LSG had put a ceiling on the subventions given to NGOs, which made it more difficult for them to cope with EPP and ES and to attain financial viability in the face of rising operating costs and the increasing trend of staff salaries, especially among the nursing staff.

SAGE

36. Mr TIK Chi-yuen said that the across-the-board rate of adjustments to subvention allocations in EPP and ES was unfair to NGOs of smaller scale since there was little room for them to achieve cost saving. NGOs were facing increasing financial difficulties due to heavier service demand and rising trend of salaries following the recent economic recovery. He urged the Administration to expeditiously review the LSG subventions system.

Community Care and Nursing Home Workers General Union

37. Mr CHENG Ching-fat said that failure of the SWD to provide subvention on personal emolument according to the Benchmark Salary forced the NGOs to become unscrupulous employers. NGOs had no choice but to resort to reduce staff salaries and lay off staff to save costs. The LSG subventions system also

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put a ceiling on the subventions given to NGOs, which had an adverse impact on their service quality.

The Administration's response

38. PASHWF(F) responded as follows –

- (a) paragraph 4 of the Administration's response had made it clear that the Benchmark Salary was the basis for calculating the salaries component of the LSG but it was not meant to be a guarantee for the level of salaries actually paid to staff of NGOs. This view was shared by the observations made by Legal Services Division of LegCo Secretariat;
- (b) the statement in the paragraph 52 of the minutes of the 13th LSGSC meeting held on 21 October 2003 was made in the context of illustrating how NGOs with Snapshot Salary above the Benchmark Salary could come down by 2% per annum to reach the Benchmark. Hence, this statement should not be taken to mean that the Benchmark Salary would not be subject to EPP and ES adjustments. In fact, it was mentioned in paragraph 53 and 54 of the minutes of meeting that NGOs should all try to achieve the targets of EPP and ES;
- (c) LSG subventions to NGOs were provided taking into account any adjustment due to EPP and ES that would affect all Government and publicly-funded organisations. The social welfare sector was not the only one being affected. In the past few years, all public sectors had engaged themselves in re-engineering and restructuring exercises to attain financial viability. Having regard to the financial difficulties faced by some NGOs, the Administration had introduced tide-over grant (TOG) and special one-off grant (SOG) to assist NGOs which had difficulty in attaining financial viability under the LSG provisions;
- (d) the Administration was concerned about the alleged non-reporting of work injuries in the welfare sector as raised by the deputation, because under the existing labour legislation, all employers were required to report to the Labour Department (LD) any work accidents involving their employees;
- (e) NGOs joined the LSG subventions system voluntarily, with some joining even after the adjustments arising from EPP and ES; and
- (f) while NGOs could exercise flexibility in resource allocations under the LSG subventions system, SWD had reminded NGOs that they

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had to first consult their staff before making any changes to their terms and conditions of service.

39. Chief Social Work Officer (Subventions) (CSWO(S)) supplemented that –

- (a) taking into account their financial difficulties, some NGOs were exempted from further EPP after the 1% across-the-board subventions reduction. In fact, many NGOs achieved the remaining EPP gains through service rationalization and in-situ expansion of existing services rather than reduction in subventions; and
- (b) the Administration had engaged NGOs in regular dialogues when implementing the EPP and ES initiatives. The Administration was appreciative of the efforts made by NGOs in achieving the targets of EPP and ES. There were cases where NGOs achieved good results in financial management upon transition to LSG, and SAGE was one of the successful examples.

Discussion

40. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan asked the Administration to provide an explanation on why there was a reduction in the Benchmark Salary of NGOs whereas the Administration's papers stated that any adjustments due to EPP and ES would not have any impact on the Benchmark Salary.

41. CSWO(S) responded that the Benchmark Salary was used as the basis for calculating the salaries components of the LSG, but the actual LSG given to NGOs would take into account the adjustments arising from EPP and ES. The adjustments in subventions by EPP and ES were also made clear to all NGOs involved in the subventions allocation letters in each of the financial year. All NGOs concerned had noted the adjustments and signed to indicate their acceptance of the arrangement. The Chairman supplemented that according to the Administration's interpretation, the actual level of Benchmark Salary in each year's subvention would be subject to adjustments of EPP and ES.

42. Mr CHUA Hoi-wai pointed out that the paper provided by Legal Services Divisions of LegCo Secretariat had not taken into account the actual impacts of EPP and ES on the Benchmark Salary of staff of NGOs. He was of the view that the Administration had not explicitly asked NGOs to indicate acceptance of any reduction in the Benchmark Salary.

43. CSWO(S) responded that the technical paper presented in that meeting was used to illustrate how NGOs with Snapshot Salary above the Benchmark Salary could come down by 2% per annum to reach the Benchmark. This

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statement should not be taken to mean that the Benchmark Salary would not be subject to EPP and ES adjustments. In response to the Chairman's enquiry, CSWO(S) explained that the Benchmark Salary was determined on the basis of the mid-point salaries of the pay scales as at 31 March 2000.

44. Mr Albert HO expressed doubt on why the Benchmark Salary, which was supposed to remain at a constant level, would change every year. He said that if the subventions given to NGOs after the EPP and ES reductions were not sufficient for NGOs to attain financial viability unless staff salaries were reduced, it was contrary to the original intention of the Benchmark Salary.

45. CSWO(S) responded that under LSG subventions system, NGOs could exercise flexibility in resource allocation. To his understanding, not all NGOs resorted to reduce staff salaries to attain financial viability. In response to Chairman's enquiry on whether the Benchmark would change every year, CSWO(S) reiterated that the Benchmark Salary was determined with reference to the pay scales of 31 March 2000, and the same calculation would apply for NGOs switching to LSG at different time points. However, the actual LSG subventions given to NGOs would take into account the EPP and ES adjustments.

46. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung remarked that social welfare spending could not be reduced in view of increasingly complex social issues. He said that taking into consideration the immense financial pressure faced by NGOs, the Administration should expeditiously review the LSG subventions system. He did not see any ground to continue a system which was beset with problems.

47. PASHWF(F) responded that the Administration had been expanding the social welfare expenditures, but the additional expenditures would not be across-the-board. New money would usually be spent on implementing new service programmes in priority areas.

48. Mr CHUA Hoi-wai and the Chairman asked the Administration to provide proof that NGOs had indicated acceptance of reduction from the Benchmark Salary. In response, CSWO(S) said that the Benchmark Salary was the salaries component of LSG, and the subventions given to NGOs had taken into account the EPP and ES adjustments as explained above.

49. The Chairman criticized the Administration for playing with words on the calculation basis of Benchmark Salary. He said that given the Administration's instance on this matter, further discussions by the Panel on this matter would not be very fruitful. He recommended the NGOs to make use of other channels for expressing their difficulties, if necessary. CSWO(S) stressed that the Administration had engaged NGOs in regular dialogues when implementing EPP and ES initiatives, and the Administration had attached great importance to its partnership with NGOs.

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50. Ms Christine FANG pointed out that while EPP and ES adjustments affected all sectors, LSG had put a ceiling on the annual subventions given to NGOs, which resulted in additional financial pressure on them. She hoped SWD would request the LSGSC to review the current levels of LSG. The Chairman and members concurred with Ms FANG's view. In this regard, Ms Sophie LEUNG said that the advantages brought by LSG such as the increased flexibility in financial management should also be taken into account in the review.

IV. Further discussion on workload of and challenges faced by social workers

(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)2265/05-06(01) and CB(2)2707/05-06(03))

51. The Chairman said that the subject had been discussed at the Panel's last regular meeting. Since the deputations' views had already been heard, this session would be devoted to discussion between members and the Administration on the subject.

52. Members noted the Administration's written response to the views raised by deputations at the last Panel meeting as detailed in its paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)2707/05-06(03)).

53. Mrs Sophie LEUNG agreed with the Administration that enforcing a self-reliance philosophy and policy and encouraging cross-sectoral community support, such as the concept of social enterprise, could help alleviate the workload of social workers. She hoped that concrete actions would be made by the Administration to take these recommendations forward. By making reference to the batterer intervention programme, she further said that the welfare sector needed to explore new measures to tackle the family violence and other social problems which were becoming increasingly complex.

54. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung pointed out that increasing public awareness of their social rights resulted in a growing demand for social welfare services, making the workload of social workers much heavier than before. He urged the Administration to inject additional resources to expand and strengthen service provision to ease the workload of social workers who were already hard pressed by their heavy duties.

55. PASHWF(F) responded that the tackling of increasingly complex social issues faced by our society required the concerted effort of all sectors in Hong Kong, not just social workers. The Administration had adopted a teamwork and multi-disciplinary approach to better meet the needs of service recipients. As in the case of family violence, community resources and network could be used to facilitate early identification of potential problems, which could help alleviate the

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workload of social workers. Excluding the expenditures on social security, the Administration had in fact been expanding the social welfare expenditures over the past years, including subventions given to NGOs for developing new services. However, the Administration was of the view that a mere increase in social welfare expenditures might not be the most effective way to ease the heavy workload of social workers.

56. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung expressed dissatisfaction with the Administration's response. He said that RainLily, which was providing an effective 24-hour, one-stop post-event intervention services to victims of sexual violence, was worthy of receiving regular government subvention. He pointed out that given the heavy workload faced by frontline social workers, it was pointless for the Administration to talk about identifying more potential cases and exploring new areas of services by making use of community resources.

57. In response, PASHWF(F) said that in deciding whether subvention should be provided to a particular service provider, the Administration needed to consider the overall coordination of service provision across the territory. The new service model as proposed by the Administration should provide an easier contact point, whose services would be more easily accessible to victims of sexual violence who might come from different locations of the whole territory.

58. Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che of Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union said that social workers were professionals devoted to providing services to the community. However, their devotion had been adversely affected as a result of increasingly complex social issues, heavy work pressure and decreasing resources and support. Due to reduction in subventions, NGOs were offering lower salaries to their newly recruited social workers to attain financial viability. The Snapshot Staff were also facing potential wage cut by the management of NGOs, and their terms and conditions of service were much worse than their counterparts working in SWD. Mr CHEUNG said that LSG was the major culprit for the heavy work pressure faced by staff in the welfare sector. He urged the Administration to expeditiously review the LSG subventions system.

59. Ms Christine FANG said that NGOs providing social services welcomed reforms, and they had made tremendous efforts in re-engineering their services and exploring more innovative work approaches. However, the welfare sector had been exhausted by excessive workload and increasing administrative work arising from making business proposals to apply for various kinds of funds. The staff relation in the sector was also deteriorating, as reflected by the increasing number of anonymous complaints against supervisors. She urged the Administration to address directly the excessive work pressure facing frontline social workers by –

- (a) formulating a long-term plan to guide the development of welfare services. With a blueprint setting out clearly the strategic visions

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of social welfare services, the contributions made by welfare sector could be better recognized; and

- (b) reviewing LSG subventions system which had put NGOs into financial difficulties.

60. Ms LI Fung-ying questioned why the Administration was reluctant to review the LSG subventions system, which was beset with problems and caused difficulties for the social welfare sector. She also pointed out the discrepancies between the Administration's response in LC Paper No. CB(2)2707/05-06(03) and the picture given by the welfare sector, particularly in the number of work injuries, and the impact of differential remuneration terms on the morale of contract staff. On training for social workers, Ms LI asked the Administration to provide details on what training programmes had been provided to social workers to enhance their competence.

61. Assistant Director for Social Welfare (Development) (ADSW(D)) responded that the Administration recognized the work pressure faced by social workers in light of the immense workload and the increasingly complex problems. He pointed out the following –

- (a) the Administration had adopted various measures to help alleviate the work pressure faced by social workers, which were detailed in the Administration's paper;
- (b) the tackling of complex social issues faced by the society required the concerted effort of all sectors. He hoped that the general public would understand the difficulties and limitations of social workers and give due recognition to their work and contributions;
- (c) subventions given to NGOs would cover the expenses for them to purchase employees' compensation insurance and public liability insurance. Under the existing legislation, an employer was required to report to LD any work accidents in relation to his/her employees. On the number of work injuries per 1 000 employees as reported by LD, there had been a decreasing trend among employees in the welfare sector; and
- (d) on-going training for social workers had been provided in the social welfare sector to enhance their competence with focus on subjects such as family violence and risk assessment.

62. PASHWF(F) supplemented that the number of work injuries reported by LD was calculated on the basis of the rate of injuries per 1 000 workers, whereas the actual number of work injuries would be affected by the number of in-service employees in the welfare sector.

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63. Ms LI Fung-ying further asked the Administration –

- (a) to provide figures on the amount of financial resources put on training for social workers, the number of social workers having received training; and the types of training they had received; and
- (b) what measures had been taken by the Administration to make sure the interests of contract staff in the social welfare sector could be best protected.

64. In response, PASHWF(F) said that contract staff existed in all sectors, and not just in the social welfare sector. In view of the current economic climate, it was commonplace for contract staff to receive employment terms different from the Snapshot Staff on pension terms. For contract staff employed to assist in ad-hoc projects, their contract duration would normally be shorter. ADSW(D) supplemented that as stated in paragraph 14 of the Administration's paper, SWD had spent \$1.93 million in 2005-06 to render 379 training courses/programmes reaching 8,712 social workers.

65. Mr Albert HO said that the Administration did not fully appreciate the immense work pressure faced by social workers. He pointed out that the three issues discussed at today's meeting were closely intertwined. Without a clear blueprint for long-term development of social welfare services and a review on LSG subventions systems, the heavy workload of social workers could not be fully addressed. Mrs Sophie LEUNG shared Mr HO's view. As to the case of RainLily as raised by Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung, she hoped that RainLily could continue to co-exist with the multi-purpose crisis intervention and support centre proposed by the Administration. The Administration should also allow more NGOs to participate in providing social welfare services, so that it could be less involved in directly providing welfare services.

66. PASHWF(F) responded that SOG and TOG were introduced by the Administration to provide assistance to NGOs to cope with salary increments of Snapshot Staff and to enhance their human resources practices. It demonstrated the Administration's commitment to injecting additional resources to alleviate the workload of social workers.

67. Mr TSE Sai-kit asked the Administration to clarify whether the number of work injuries included the frontline staff other than social workers working in the welfare sector, such as home helpers and elderly care home workers. He also pointed out that social workers worked as a team. The high turnover of contract staff due to job instability would adversely affect the building-up of the team spirit. He further said that the sense of inability to tackle complex social issues could be frustrating to social workers, which put additional pressure on them.

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68. Mr HO Siu-kei said that the inability to fulfill the service needs of the community due to resource constraints faced by NGOs upon the introduction of LSG subventions system was damaging the morale of social workers. He urged the Administration to expeditiously review the LSG subvention system.

69. In response to the Chairman's enquiry on the number of work injuries, PASHWF(F) responded that all workers in the social welfare sector had been included in the statistics. ADSW(D) supplemented that the number of work injuries reported by LD was calculated on the basis of the rate of work injuries per 1 000 workers, whereas the figures quoted by NGO staff unions were absolute figures.

70. In closing, the Chairman said that the subject had been discussed twice by the Panel, but it was frustrating that little could be done to alleviate social workers' immense work pressure. He also expressed dissatisfaction with the Administration's complete disregard of the motion passed by this Panel urging the Administration to review the LSG subventions system. The Chairman recommended and members agree to invite SHWF to attend future meetings of the Panel which involved discussions on the LSG subventions system, workload of social workers, and the social welfare planning mechanism.

V. Any other business

71. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 2:00 pm.

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