

**Government's Responses to Comments on the Discussion Item
"Workload of and Challenges Faced by Social Workers"
at the Meeting of the Panel on Welfare Services on 12 June 2006**

	Comments	Responses
1.	<p><i>Lump Sum Grant</i></p> <p><u>Abolition of notional staff establishment</u> The implementation of the Lump Sum Grant (LSG) system has led to the abolition of notional staff establishment in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), excessive workload for staff and impact on service quality. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) is urged to set a standard, or at least minimum, establishment for the welfare sector.</p>	<p>Under the LSG system, SWD no longer imposes input control on staff establishment, pay level or individual expenditure items. This is to allow subvented NGOs to have flexibility in deploying resources among their service units to meet evolving priorities and changing community needs.</p> <p>SWD will not require NGOs to set a standard or minimum establishment for each type of service. NGOs may determine, at their own discretion, staffing arrangements in light of their human resources management policy and service demand, etc. However, for specific service units such as residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), SWD has stipulated in the Essential Service Requirements (ESRs) of the Funding and Service Agreement (FSA) that service units should maintain staff of specific ranks (including registered social workers and nurses) in their establishment to ensure service quality.</p>

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	<p><u>Increased number of work injury cases</u> The excessive workload for staff has resulted in an increase in the number of work injury cases and severe occupational safety problems. The increase in insurance premium has posed heavy financial burden on NGOs.</p>	<p>SWD has included in the LSG subventions an amount proportionate to NGOs' expenditures on salaries and other items for the purchase of employees' compensation insurance and public liability insurance. SWD requires subvented NGOs to report annually on their status of insurance to ensure their compliance with the legislative requirement for insurance policy.</p> <p>Under the prevailing Employee's Compensation Ordinance, an employer is obliged to report cases of work injury involving his/her employees to the Labour Department (LD). An employer is deemed to have committed an offence if he/she without reasonable excuse fails to report within a specified time or does not report to LD any work injury cases involving his/her employee(s) or makes any false or misleading information. Welfare agencies are required to report cases of work injury involving their employees according to and in compliance with the legislative requirement.</p> <p>According to LD, the rate of work injuries per 1 000 employees in the welfare sector has dropped from 30.4 in 2002 to 27.1 in 2005.</p>

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	<p><u>No job security for contract staff</u> Contract staff feels insecure and uncertain about their future. The lack of job security and the bleak prospect of career development led to their low morale.</p>	<p>After the implementation of the LSG system, we understand that some NGOs have worked out their pay structures for new recruits with reference to market conditions, under which resources could be deployed more effectively and staff salary pitched at a level commensurate with the prevalent market situation. Employment offered on contract terms is indeed a practice which follows the market trend. These NGOs will review their pay structures on a regular basis to ensure that the salary level is attractive to quality staff.</p> <p>We also understand that different NGOs adopt different pay structures and strategies to suit their own circumstances and needs. SWD has also reminded their boards of directors/management that the staff concerned should be fully consulted when formulating relevant policies.</p> <p>Meanwhile, we believe that salary is not the most important factor affecting staff morale as compared with, among others, job aspiration and satisfaction, as well as the vision and management culture of NGOs.</p>
	<p><u>Social workers taking up non-professional duties</u> Non-professional duties such as handling huge amount of paperwork, engaging in fund-raising activities or drafting proposals for applications of fund, have added to the workload for social workers and affected their direct contact with service users. It is suggested that the Social Workers Registration Board should make regular assessments and develop an index of the work pressure for social workers.</p>	<p>SWD considers that individual NGOs have the autonomy to work out their operation procedures (including that of paperwork) in light of their own requirements and criteria. For fund-raising activities, NGOs are also given a free hand to determine whether participation of staff in such activities may achieve objectives such as enhancing staff's understanding of NGOs' visions, increasing the transparency of NGOs and allowing staff to know more about the NGOs' financial situation.</p>

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	<p><u>Blocking social workers' sideways and upward movements</u> Serving social workers are often subject to wage reduction or forced to convert to contract terms upon their completion of further studies or promotion. SWD is therefore urged to compile the seventh Good Practice on Corporate Governance to reprimand those NGOs that cut their staff's salaries upon their promotion, transfer or completion of further studies.</p>	<p>We understand that after the implementation of the LSG system, some NGOs have undergone various degrees of structural and service re-engineering in light of their operational needs. Some NGOs have also developed new pay structures so that resources could be deployed more effectively and staff salary pitched at a level commensurate with the prevalent market situation. SWD has also reminded their board of directors/management that the staff concerned should be fully consulted when formulating relevant policies.</p>
	<p><u>Inadequate staffing of RCHEs</u> Staff is required to take up work of other colleagues on leave due to unavailability of relief workers or reserving such resources for other purposes. This has led to excessive workload for staff and increase in work injury cases.</p>	<p>When granting subventions to NGOs, SWD will set out ESRs in FSA, requiring that the service units must maintain staff of specific ranks in their establishment to ensure service quality. Besides, NGOs may have flexibility in deploying resources and determine the staffing arrangements in light of their human resources management policy and service demand. SWD will closely monitor the situation related to work injury and tighten supervision when necessary.</p>
	<p><u>Increased pressure on integrated home care services</u> Integrated home care services are plagued with problems such as inadequate staffing, enormous work pressure and small manning ratio.</p>	<p>When granting subventions to NGOs, SWD will set out ESRs in FSA, requiring that the service units must maintain staff of specific ranks in their establishment to ensure service quality. Besides, NGOs may have flexibility in deploying resources and determine the staffing arrangements in light of their human resources management policy and service demand.</p>

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	<p><u>Lack of resources for supporting central administration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Middle-ranking colleagues of NGOs are required to assume supervisory tasks alongside a number of service duties. Besides giving professional supervision, it is also their job to handle huge amount of administrative work or even take up fund-raising responsibilities to meet service expenditures. Heavy workload has kept them so occupied that they could hardly find time to have professional development. ● The NGO management is responsible for the financial and personnel matters and has to answer to the increasing public demand on their governance and accountability. Yet NGOs have not received any additional support for their central administration, and they were subject to substantial cutback in government subventions in the past few years. ● The Government should review the level of the LSG subventions, particularly taking into account the requirement of NGOs on central administration and the mechanism for calculating the subventions for newly allocated services. 	<p>In formulating the standard of service volume for FSA, SWD has taken into account factors like the volume of service that can be provided by each subvented service unit and users' demand for the service, and relevant decisions would only be made after discussions with the relevant NGOs.</p> <p>While NGOs, under the LSG system, enjoy greater flexibility and autonomy in managing their human resources and finances in light of their various operational needs, we understand that they also have to deal with many challenges in times of changes. In the past five years, in order to assist NGOs in strengthening their corporate governance, SWD has provided training for board directors and management staff of NGOs, compiled guidelines of best practices in management, published the reference guide "Leading Your NGO" and assisted NGOs in implementing BIPs through the support of the Lotteries Fund. We are delighted to see many NGOs have significant improvements in human resources management, financial management and various aspects of central administration. With regard to BIPs, we always stand ready to discuss with NGO applicants about the necessity and viability of their projects.</p> <p>We are pleased to note from the information captured by the Service Performance Monitoring System of SWD that despite all the challenges, our social workers have maintained a high quality of service. We will continue to introduce measures in support of social workers and call for concerted efforts from the public to build an inclusive and harmonious society.</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Government should consider relaxing the application criteria of the Business Improvement Projects (BIPs) so that NGOs can deploy relevant resources more flexibly for staff training or for maintenance, repair and upgrading of the management system with a view to easing the pressure brought on their staff by the changes. 	
2.	<i>Enhanced Productivity Programme</i>	
	<p>Changes are always associated with resource reduction. People cannot but query that the Government's real intention is merely to save resources and minimise its commitment. Rounds of efficiency savings have led to a total reduction of subvention by nearly 10% while re-engineering has lowered the unit cost of service provision (generally down by more than 14% over the past few years). The so-called "provision of additional resources" serves only to fill the ever-widening demand gap. NGOs and colleagues are required to meet increasing social needs with fewer resources.</p>	<p>In the past few years, Hong Kong suffered financial hardship triggered by globalisation and the Asian financial turmoil. In view of the local economic conditions, the Government had initiated the across-the-board Enhanced Productivity Programme and Efficiency Savings measures in various public sectors and subvented NGOs to ensure more effective use of public funds and maintain the health of our public finances. As part of the public sector, the welfare sector is also affected by the initiatives.</p>

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3.	<p><i>Welfare Planning Mechanism</i></p> <p>In a short span of five years, the welfare sector has undergone radical changes amid hasty reforms, during which old reform measures are replaced by other new initiatives before their effectiveness could be properly assessed. As the Government's welfare policy, with no clear positioning, lacks vision, NGOs find it difficult to formulate long-term planning on areas such as service development, staff training and human resources development. For individual social workers, they are hardly able to draw up plans for career development. It is hoped that the Government would re-examine the welfare planning mechanism; discuss its welfare blueprint with NGOs, NGO staff, service users and the public; and enhance partnership with NGOs so that the welfare sector will have more opportunities to participate in the discussion on the development of welfare service.</p>	<p>The political and socio-economic scene of Hong Kong has changed significantly in recent years. To address the changing needs of our community, particularly those of the disadvantaged groups, the welfare planning process would have to be flexible enough to allow the Government and NGOs to respond promptly to the prevalent needs and situation.</p> <p>Starting from 2004, the Government has engaged the welfare sector in the discussions on the Strategic Framework for the Social Welfare and an annual consultation mechanism with the welfare sector was introduced to seek the views of the sector and members of the welfare-related advisory committees on the priorities of the coming years. There were also useful exchanges with the sector on the longer-term development. This mechanism can therefore be regarded as an annual rollover exercise to plan for the coming years.</p> <p>Both the Government and the welfare sector find the new annual consultation mechanism useful in exchanging views and setting the priorities to tie in with the Government's policy and resource planning cycle. The views gathered have been reflected in the Policy Address where appropriate. The Government will continue with the various measures of enhancing the welfare planning process and consider whether any further improvement is required.</p>

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4.	<p><i>Mechanism for Funding Projects</i></p> <p>In recent years, the Government has provided funding on a project basis to subsidise short-term welfare projects, with the long-term objectives of building social capital and helping the disadvantaged. However, the Government has in general provided funding to these projects for only one or two years. This makes it impossible to achieve any long-term and sustainable outcomes. While NGOs recognised the Government's long-term objectives and applied for funds, it turned out that this required them, however, to devote more resources and make more financial commitment. For the recent funding of projects, the Government has gone so far as to make queries about the employment of additional staff in NGOs. This begs the question: who should bear the administrative costs of the new services, new initiatives and measures? It is hoped that the Government would review the mechanism of Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) and in particular, the impact of its funding to relevant projects in respect of service level and continuity.</p>	<p>The CIIF provides seed money as preliminary support for projects, with the long-term objective of helping them develop in their own right and operate independently.</p> <p>Drawing on past experiences and taking into account the recommendations of the Evaluation Consortium Report, the CIIF will continue to foster the development of social capital in the future. It is hoped that through the tripartite partnership among the public, the business sector and the Government as well as cross-sectoral collaboration, the notion of community building and the impact of sustainable development would be further enhanced so as to unite all social sectors to work for the common good of our community.</p>

	Comments	Responses
5.	<p data-bbox="241 277 969 316"><i>Socio-economic Policy-induced Pressure on Social Workers and the Community</i></p> <p data-bbox="241 328 969 651"><u>Little recognition from the public</u> Social workers are subject to heavy workload and have no job satisfaction as they receive little recognition and understanding from the public. In this connection, apart from allocating more resources, the Government should also help relieve the work pressure of social workers and improve their working environment.</p> <p data-bbox="241 715 969 1279"><u>Socio-economic policy-induced pressure on disadvantaged groups</u> The Government should carry out an objective review of the various socio-economic policies which have brought pressure to bear on the community, especially the disadvantaged groups, with a view to formulating broad and long-term social welfare policy. The Government should also take precaution in advance by deploying more resources for preventive and educational work in order to reinforce the supporting network for the public and heighten their awareness of the social and family problems.</p>	<p data-bbox="992 328 2080 944">Despite the various measures and initiatives implemented by the Government, it should be pointed out that the ultimate mission of the social work profession is to help the disadvantaged build up self-confidence and self-esteem with a view to helping people to help themselves, and helping others later on. Social workers have acted as enablers, supporters and facilitators in the process. Their efforts alone, however, would not be adequate in bringing solutions to all social issues nor ensuring the well-being of all. The various sectors of the community, including the public, the welfare sector, the media and the politicians need to take a realistic expectation on social workers and appreciate the many limitations they are facing. After all, the building of a harmonious and inclusive society requires the concerted efforts of the Government and all sectors of the community. Individuals, families, the neighbourhood and community at large all have a role to play to make this happen.</p>

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	<p><u>Unjustified public comments on social workers created conflicts between social workers and their service users</u></p> <p>In the face of aggravating social and family problems, the media, politicians and opinion formers tend to pin the responsibility of handling such issues upon frontline social workers of the Government and NGOs. Hyperbolic and unjustified comments from politicians and the public arena have alienated the public from social workers and driven a wedge between social workers and their service users, eventually making social workers a scapegoat for the social problems.</p> <hr/> <p><u>Pressure brought by the legislators representing the welfare sector</u></p> <p>Legislators representing the welfare sector have failed to reflect objectively the actual work condition of, and difficulties faced by, the government social workers, thereby deepening public misunderstanding of their work. The sector is urged to unite and seek common ground while accommodating differences, strive through adversities, enrich their expertise, uphold their professional standards and ethics, and fulfil the mission of serving people in need. It is hoped that the community would give full confidence and support to</p>	

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	<p>the work of social workers, help facilitate better interaction and communication among the public, NGOs and social workers and remove all the elements that are detrimental to the development of the profession.</p>	
6.	<p><i>Handling of Application for Assistance in Kind by SWD</i></p> <p>Despite the fact that frontline social workers specialised in family casework counselling services have been under immense work pressure, they are still required to undertake additional duties by conducting “assessments” on relevant applications under some ambivalent guidelines with some of the applications even subject to regular review. As such, social workers have to handle huge amount of paperwork. They could spare no time to maintain regular close contact with other clients, provide counselling services for or assistance to high-risk individuals with emotional and family/interpersonal relationship problems. Failing this, the problems would get worse.</p>	<p>The social workers of SWD will conduct full assessments on the needs of their service users when helping them tackle their personal or family problems. On top of counselling and group services, social workers will, on a case-by-case basis, help service users alleviate their pressures and distress arising from the problems they face in daily life through arranging referral and assistance in kind in light of their welfare needs. It is also an integral part of casework service.</p> <p>SWD has drawn up clear guidelines on various relevant work procedures for staff reference, which include, among other things, those on application for charitable/trust funds in emergency situations, on application for compassionate re-housing or other housing assistance, as well as on issue of medical fee waivers. In handling the requests for assistance in kind, social workers are required to collect relevant information of the cases and exercise their professional judgment to assess the eligibility of the applicants. Besides, as established and stringent monitoring mechanism and approval requirements for all kinds of applications are already in place, social workers will handle the requests of service users, pursuant to the established screening criteria.</p>

	Comments	Responses
7.	<p><i>Inequitable Assignment of Cases in Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs)</i></p> <p>According to FSA, IFSCs are required to handle a certain number of cases and meet a target regarding group services. However, SWD has not set out the workload for social workers of different grades and ranks. This has led to a situation where workload varies among the social workers in the 40 IFSCs and their supervisors do not have standard guidelines on the assignment of cases, hence resulting in mutual suspicions and growing grievances among social workers. It is desirable for SWD to set out the workload for social workers of different grades and ranks.</p>	<p>IFSCs have attached importance to diversified intervention approaches (including case counselling, different types of group services and activities as well as outreaching service, etc.) in order to provide appropriate services for their respective community. This is a departure from the past practice, where the focus was placed on family casework handled by traditional family service centres. In addition, the officer-in-charge of IFSCs would adjust the proportion of duties of individual staff in light of service needs and actual manpower level so as to provide quality service and allow their staff to make best use of their expertise.</p> <p>At present, there are 40 IFSCs under the SWD. In addition to the officers-in-charge of IFSCs, the manpower establishment of social workers also includes Assistant Social Work Officers (ASWOs) (325, excluding 18 contract social workers), Senior Social Work Assistants (SSWAs) (144) and Social Work Assistants (SWAs) (182). Manpower levels at IFSCs are different, depending on the varied service needs of different districts whilst the District Social Welfare Officers would be flexible in deployment of human resources in response to local service needs.</p> <p>In mid-2005, in consultation with management and staff representatives at district level, SWD came up with a set of job descriptions in which the duties of the staff of various grades including that of ASWO, SSWA and SWA in IFSCs were defined. The job descriptions were then distributed to social workers in various service units</p>

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		<p>for reference. Also, SWD had held repeated discussions with the welfare sector and relevant staff before drawing up FSA for IFSCs. It should be noted that the Output Standards set out in FSA refer to the annual overall service targets of IFSCs. As mentioned above, IFSCs have attached importance to diversified intervention approaches. The officers-in-charge will adjust the proportion of duties of individual staff in light of service needs and actual manpower levels. Therefore, it will not be practical to specify the workload proportion for staff of different grades and ranks.</p> <p>On assignment of cases, social workers of an IFSC under SWD are now required to use the screening tool (Behavioural Checklist with Screening Scale) (BCSS) developed by the consultant team of the University of Hong Kong for the evaluation of pilot IFSC projects to identify the service needs of users when handling enquiries/referrals or receiving new help-seekers. They are also required to complete enquiry/intake form of service users for submission to the officer-in-charge for endorsement. Before assigning cases, the officer-in-charge will assess the information collected for the cases (including scoring of the BCSS as well as the observations and professional judgment of social workers) and will, where necessary, seek clarification or additional data from the staff responsible for the completion of the BCSS. The officer-in-charge will then determine the case nature and decide on which social worker to follow up the case. Along this mechanism, the officer-in-charge will assign cases of different nature to relevant social workers for follow-up in light of the actual needs of the cases and the different duties of social workers of various grades.</p>

	Comments	Responses
8.	<i>Staffing of Social Workers and Supporting Facilities in Tuen Mun Children and Juvenile Home</i>	
	<p><u>Inadequate number of Chief Social Work Assistants (CSWAs) on duty</u> SWD has failed to arrange at least one CSWA in each shift even though it considers that CSWA(s) should be on duty in each shift to carry out specific duties. This has seriously undermined staff morale.</p>	<p>We have arranged an adequate level of manpower in light of the capacity and operational needs of the new residential home to ensure that there will be one CSWA on duty in each shift to carry out specific duties. If the CSWA is on sick/vacation leave or away on training, an SSWA will perform the duties during his/her absence.</p>
	<p><u>Failure to provide staff quarters for social workers</u> Lacking sufficient manpower to cope with the heavy workload, it is not uncommon for social workers to work “back-to-back shifts” (i.e. off duty at 10:00 p.m. and resume duty at the residential home the following morning at 7:30 a.m.) However, SWD is reluctant to provide staff quarters for social workers living in the urban area who then need to travel long distance and end up finding themselves exhausted in working the “back-to-back shifts”. They are deprived of adequate rest and the time to enjoy family life. This would lead to poor morale and undermine their sense of belonging to the residential home. It goes without saying that the service quality will be compromised.</p>	<p>SWD will arrange appropriate shifts for its staff in such a way that, where possible, they would not have to resume duty shortly after work to minimise the inconvenience caused to them.</p> <p>Under the existing government policy, the facilities and the usage of a new residential home are subject to stringent approval criteria by the Government Property Agency. Having due regard to the relevant factors, including the vicinity of the proposed new residential home to public transport system and the utilisation rate of various staff facilities in the existing correctional homes in the past few years, SWD has set aside two self-contained staff sleep-in rooms, each with the capacity to accommodate two sets of beds, in the new residential home for the use of staff who need to stay behind after work.</p>

	Comments	Responses
9.	<p><i>Shortage of Social Workers in the Licensing Office of Residential Care Homes for the Elderly (LORCHE)</i></p> <p>At the meeting of the Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services held on 5 September 2005, the Director of Social Welfare (DSW) pledged to arrange more inspections by social workers in the wake of an increase of complaints against private residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs). However, no improvement has yet to be noted. As the incidents involving irregularities mainly take place in the RCHEs after office hours, we suggest that LORCHE should employ more social workers to conduct surprise inspections after office hours so as to safeguard the well being of the elderly. DSW responded in October last year that SWD would consider this idea, but nothing has come out of it yet.</p>	<p>SWD aims to adopt a three-pronged approach to improve the service of RCHEs through licensing control, capacity building and service monitoring and enforcement. SWD has also considered strengthening the manpower of LORCHE in order to strengthen the inspection and monitoring of the RCHEs.</p> <p>An average of about 240 complaints were received annually for the past three years, and the complaints are directed against, among others, staff manpower, health and care services, management, hygiene and facilities as well as failure to meet the requirements of the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme. It is also noted that health and care services topped the complaint list.</p> <p>Therefore, LORCHE intends to strengthen the manpower of social worker and nursing grades in 2006-07, by recruiting 5 additional ASWOs and 5 contract Registered Nurses. The additional frontline officers will be deployed to the Social Work Inspectorate Team (SWIT) and the Health Inspectorate Team. They would help increase the frequency of surprise inspections on RCHEs and handle the ever-increasing complaints. In addition to these duties, the SWIT will also step up prosecution against RCHEs in breach of licensing requirements and participate in the policy review and formulation process by, for example, assisting in seeking legal advice, conducting regular reviews of the working guidelines on complaints/prosecutions as well as acting on the recommendations by Efficiency Unit on workflow improvement, etc.</p>

	Comments	Responses
		<p>The 5 contract Registered Nurses report on duty to LORCHE from late May to early July this year. As for the ASWO grade, a recruitment exercise is conducted by the Personnel Section of the Administration Branch of SWD in conjunction with other Service Branches and the new recruits are expected to join LORCHE in batches by the end of this year or in next year.</p>
10.	<p><i>Mechanism for Bidding of Services</i></p> <p>The general practice of granting contracts to the lowest tender has affected service quality and left no room for professional development. On the other hand, cutbacks in resources have severely tied NGOs' hands in terms of resource deployment.</p>	<p>The introduction of competitive bidding in welfare services (competitive bidding) aims to provide public services that can achieve greater cost-effectiveness and best value-for-money and are target-based and customer-oriented. A vigorous assessment system is adopted in competitive bidding. The assessment criterion is quality comes first, then the price. A weighted scoring system placing emphasis on quality is also applied (e.g. the assessment criteria is about 60% on quality and 40% on price in the home care service contract). This competitive bidding allows operators more flexibility in resource deployment and service delivery, with the ultimate objective of better catering for user needs.</p> <p>This approach of competitive bidding is now generally accepted by individual NGOs for allocation of welfare service. Each allocation exercise has attracted a keen response from the welfare sector and resulted in quality proposals/tenders.</p>
11.	<p><i>Inadequate Resources for Social Work Training</i></p> <p>In 2005-06, for example, \$1.93 million worth of resources was spent on the training of social workers,</p>	<p>Total social welfare expenditure actually includes the operating expenditures of all services, supplies, rents, salary costs of all social work professionals and non-</p>

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	<p>which accounted for only 0.02% of the social welfare expenditure of \$10.1 billion (excluding social security expenditure) in 2006-07.</p>	<p>professionals, etc. In fact, the \$1.93 million worth of resources spent on the training of social workers has not included the staff salary and administrative costs in relation to training. Therefore, it is not proper to put the total social welfare expenditure and the expenditure on the training of the social work profession together for comparison purpose.</p> <p>SWD attaches great importance to the provision of on-going training to social workers to equip them with new knowledge and skills in meeting service demand nowadays and enhance their competence in facing all the challenges stemming from the rapidly changing society. The training courses focus on some more pressing subjects such as family violence, risk assessment, multi-skill training for IFSC social workers, workplace violence as well as other development programmes such as managerial competence, stress management and change management, etc.</p>

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Social Welfare Department
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