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Panel on Public Service

Meeting on 17 July 2018

Background brief on managing work-related stress in the civil service

This paper provides background information on the assistance provided by the Administration to civil servants for managing work-related stress and summarizes major views and concerns expressed by members of the Panel on Public Service ("the Panel") on the subject in previous discussions.

Background

2. There has been a rising public expectations of the services and efficiency of the civil service to keep up with the times. Facing such higher expectations, civil servants, especially those who provide frontline services, will face some stress arising from work. With a view to helping civil servants cope with stress at work, the Administration provides professional counselling services to staff in need and organizes training and educational programmes to help staff develop stress management skills and to promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle.

Counselling services

3. The Civil Service Bureau ("CSB") has been providing a hotline counselling service scheme ("the Scheme") since 2002 to help staff cope with stress arising from work and their personal problems. Currently, Christian Family Service Centre ("CFSC") is engaged under the Scheme to provide professional counselling services, including telephone/face-to-face counselling and referral to appropriate organizations for welfare services and psychiatric consultation/treatment, to civil servants and non-civil service contract staff of some 60 bureaux and departments ("B/Ds").¹ In 2016, about 500 telephone

¹ The services cover all B/Ds except 11 departments which provide their own dedicated counselling services to their 10 000 staff.

calls were received from about 290 staff. Around 490 telephone counselling sessions, 300 face-to-face counselling interviews and 30 clinical psychology appointments were conducted with about 55% of the cases being work-related problems. From 2014 to the first quarter of 2017, about 130 workshops on practical tips for coping with work-related stress were also organized for around 2 300 participants. Other than the Scheme, 11 departments² provide dedicated departmental counselling services for their staff through in-house counselling teams or engaging professional counselling agencies.

4. Separately, Families Clinics of the Department of Health has commenced since March 2016 the provision of clinical psychology services which includes professional counselling and advice, educational activities such as seminars/talks on related subjects, to civil service eligible persons. Doctors of Families Clinics will refer civil service eligible persons in need to receive clinical psychology services. In 2016 and 2017, the attendances for the services were around 600 and 1300 respectively. With the addition of two more clinical psychologists in 2017-2018 and the clinical psychologist previously engaged by the Department of Health, the capacity of consultation was expected to reach 4 500 attendances per year. The services will be further enhanced by an additional clinical psychologist starting from 2018-2019.³

Training and educational programmes

5. As a preventive measure, CSB encourages supervisors to get to understand more about the problems encountered by their subordinates in their daily work, and provide timely assistance to them. To equip staff with the necessary skills for managing stress, as well as to promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle and healthy work environment, training programmes and educational activities are organized by the Civil Service Training and Development Institute and different departments. From 2014 to the first quarter of 2017, about 11 000 officers participated in training programmes relating to emotional, psychological and physical wellness, customer service skills, complaint resolution, handling of aggression and violence etc., and about 4 300 officers attended 22 seminars in relation to healthy work environment.

² These departments are the Correctional Services Department, the Fire Services Department, the Hong Kong Police Force, the Immigration Department, the Social Welfare Department, the Customs and Excise Department, the Department of Health, the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, the Hongkong Post, the Housing Department and the Transport Department.

³ See [Examination of Estimates of Expenditure 2018-2019 by the Finance Committee - Reply Serial No. CSB055](#) for details.

Discussions of the Panel

6. Members have all along been concerned about the support rendered to civil servants to help them cope with stress. Major views and concerns expressed by members at Panel meetings since 2012-2013 session and the Administration's responses are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Counselling services

7. In reply to members' questions about the utilization situation of the clinical psychology services provided at Families Clinics, the Administration advised that from March to December 2016, the shortest appointment time for a new case was around four weeks. Follow-up appointments would be arranged in accordance with the clinical conditions of each patient and could range from within four weeks for urgent cases, or 12 to 16 weeks for stable cases. The number of counselling sessions varied between different patients, but a typical case could involve one to four sessions. Individual counselling would normally last for one hour for new cases and 30 minutes for follow-up appointments. Having regard to the increasing pressure faced by civil servants, members urged the Administration to recruit more clinical psychologists of Families Clinics so as to further enhance the service and share the workload. The Administration noted that there was a rising demand for counselling on personal or family issues, and it would step up the current level of support and report to members in due course.

8. At the Panel meeting on 20 March 2017, a member enquired whether law enforcement agencies, in particular the Hong Kong Police Force ("HKPF"), had their own team of clinical psychologists to help their staff ease work pressure and manage stress. The Administration stressed that 11 government departments, including HKPF, had an in-house clinical psychology unit or procured related services from professional counselling agencies. Apart from providing clinical psychology and counselling services, training on emotion and stress management and how to handle work pressure would also be provided to supervisors so that they might be more alert to the stress level of their subordinates and take early actions as appropriate. In addition, some law enforcement agencies, such as HKPF, had set up volunteer teams to provide peer support. All these measures had proven to be effective in helping colleagues, particularly frontline staff, cope with work pressure.

9. Some members expressed concern on whether the Administration would keep records of the civil servants seeking clinical psychology or counselling services that might affect their promotion prospects.

The Administration pointed out that apart from clinical psychology services provided by Families Clinics or within their own departments, civil servants could choose to use hotline services run by other professional counselling agencies. Due to privacy reasons, the Administration would not obtain any personal information of the service users from CFSC and the counselling agencies engaged by Departments. In this connection, members asked how the Administration could, without knowing the problems of civil servants, provide assistance to those who were suffering from stress at work. The Administration said that counsellors of hotline services might, at the requests of the concerned civil servants, convey their problems at work to the relevant Departments. However, it was the civil servants' choice whether or not to disclose their problems to their supervisors.

Complaint handling and disciplinary mechanism

10. Given that frontline civil servants were facing immense work pressure in serving the public and dealing with public complaints, members enquired whether the Administration had provided adequate assistance to frontline civil servants. Members also asked whether any mechanism/guidelines were in place for dealing with public complaints, in particular unsubstantiated complaints against civil servants. To reduce stress on civil servants, question was raised whether CSB would review the complaint handling and disciplinary mechanisms of individual B/Ds, especially the way anonymous complaints were handled.

11. The Administration advised that in formulating the complaint handling mechanism, it had to strike a balance between facilitating the public to monitor the work of the Government and protecting staff from unsubstantiated complaints. When handling repetitive public complaints, unless the complainant could provide new information that warranted further investigation, a complaint case would normally be closed if no further remedial or follow-up action could be taken. Taking into account that the existing complaint handling mechanism was found to be effective in handling complaints against civil servants, the Administration would focus on strengthening the training on complaint handling to equip staff with the necessary skills for handling complaints in a systematic manner. Programmes on innovative problem solving and managing adversity etc., were also organized for civil servants to enhance their ability to serve the public. In addition, departmental management was encouraged to get to understand and care more about the problems faced by their staff in their daily work, and provide timely assistance to them.

Legislation to protect public officers from being arbitrarily insulted

12. At the Panel meeting on 17 July 2017, a member expressed concern on the incidents of members of the public insulting or provoking public officers with abusive language and the pressure faced by public officers in this regard. The Administration was urged to brief the Panel on the enactment of dedicated legislation to prohibit acts of insulting public officers as early as possible.

13. The Administration pointed out that as public views on the issue of whether it was necessary to legislate for the "offence of insulting public officers enforcing the laws" were divergent, it had no plan at this stage to legislate against the act of insulting public officers enforcing the laws. However, the Administration would continue to listen to the views of all parties.

Promotion of healthy lifestyle

14. In response to a member's suggestion of inviting staff as well as their families to join the recreational activities arranged by B/Ds, the Administration acknowledged that it was an effective way to improve communication between staff and management. By way of illustration, the Security Bureau had invited its staff, including some staff in eight departments under its purview and had previously worked in the Bureau, and their families to participate in its annual Sports Day.

Relevant questions raised at Council meetings and special meetings of the Finance Committee

15. Questions relating to the counselling services and occupational health training/support provided for public officers were raised at the Council meeting of 11 December 2013 and special meetings of the Finance Committee to examine the annual Estimates. The list of questions is set out in the **Appendix**.

Latest position

16. The Administration will update the Panel on the assistance provided to civil servants for managing stress at work at the Panel meeting on 17 July 2018.

Relevant papers

17. A list of relevant papers is in the Appendix.

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
11 July 2018

List of relevant papers

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Public Service	25.1.2017	Administration's follow-up response to issues raised at the Panel meeting
	17.7.2017	Administration's paper
		Minutes Administration's follow-up response to issues raised at the Panel meeting
Council Meeting	11.12.2013	Council question raised by Hon Regina IP on the enactment of Legislation to Prohibit Acts of Insulting Public Officers on Duty
Finance Committee	8.4.2013	Controlling Officer's Reply (Reply serial No. CSB016)
	31.3.2014	Controlling Officer's Reply (Reply serial No. CSB046)
		Controlling Officer's Reply (Reply serial No. CSB052)
	27.3.2015	Controlling Officer's Reply (Reply serial No. CSB031)
	1.4.2016	Controlling Officer's Reply (Reply serial No. CSB035)
16.4.2018	Controlling Officer's Reply (Reply serial No. CSB055)	