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Legislative Council

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Report of the Panel on Welfare Services for submission to the Legislative Council

Purpose

This report gives an account of the work of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the Panel") during the 2024 session of the Legislative Council ("LegCo").   It will be tabled at the Council meeting of 11 December 2024 in accordance with Rule 77(14) of the Rules of Procedure.

The Panel

2.   The Panel was formed by a resolution of the Council on 8 July 1998 and as amended on 20 December 2000, 9 October 2002, 11 July 2007, 2 July 2008 and 26 October 2022 for the purpose of monitoring and examining Government policies and issues of public concern relating to welfare, rehabilitation services, poverty and social enterprise.   The terms of reference of the Panel are in **Appendix 1**.

3.   The Panel comprises 20 members, with Revd Canon Hon Peter Douglas KOON Ho-ming and Hon Doreen KONG Yuk-foon elected as its Chairman and Deputy Chairman respectively.   The membership list of the Panel is in **Appendix 2**.

Major Work

Caring for underprivileged groups

4.   Caring for the underprivileged has always been of great concern to the Panel.   In this session, the Panel reviewed the Administration's support services for various vulnerable groups, including elderly singletons/frail elderly persons, parents and carers of persons with disabilities ("PWDs"), low-income working families and people living in poverty.

Elderly services

5.   Adhering to the principle of "ageing in place as the core, institutional care as back-up", the Administration provides suitable community care and support services to elderly persons according to their needs, enabling them to enjoy their golden years in a familiar environment.

Direction and planning of services for ageing in place

6.   With an ageing population, members suggested **implementing medium-to-long-term planning for elderly services**, including enhancing leadership and coordination, as well as establishing an interdepartmental task force to facilitate cooperation among relevant government departments.   In addition, members emphasized the need for the Administration to assess the community care services ("CCS") for the elderly, actively promote the use of gerontechnology, and provide support for those who had moved to live in the Mainland.   The Administration advised that the Elderly Services Programme Plan was completed in 2017 and the recommendations were being progressively implemented, such as increasing the number of residential care homes for the elderly ("RCHEs"), strengthening CCS and dealing with elderly services through interdepartmental collaboration. Regarding the proposal on one-stop services, the Administration considered it more appropriate to provide targeted services in view of the diverse needs of elderly persons.

7.   Members suggested that the Administration should consider building **elderly villages** or introducing a **rent-free co-housing scheme for young people and elderly persons**, so that young people who had received training in basic care skills could look after elderly persons in need.   The Administration advised that similar arrangements were already in place in some youth hostels and it would continue to monitor their effectiveness.

8.   Members expressed concern about the **adequacy of CCS**.   The Administration explained that while the ratio of elderly persons choosing subsidized residential care services to subsidized CCS was about 3:1 in 2016, data released in 2023 showed that the ratio changed to 1.3:1 for elderly persons on the waiting list for long-term care services, which indicated a significant increase in elderly persons choosing to age in place.   It would continue to explore ways to enhance support measures to encourage more elderly persons to choose to age in place.

Community Care Service Voucher Scheme for the Elderly

9.   Members pointed out that some recognized service providers participating in the Community Care Service Voucher ("CCSV") Scheme

for the Elderly lacked **support specifically for dementia patients**, and suggested including corresponding support measures.   Members also raised concern about the **utilization rate of CCSVs, which fell below 70%** in 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, and asked **how the utilization rate could be increased** and whether follow-up actions would be taken against CCSV holders who had not used their vouchers.   According to the Administration, social workers would reach out to elderly persons who had not used their CCSVs and their family members to assist them in using the vouchers, and would follow up on cases where elderly persons had stopped using CCSVs. The Administration planned to step up publicity to boost the utilization of CCSVs, and encourage participating organizations to strengthen the support services for dementia patients.

Enhancing medical-social collaboration

10.   Members suggested that the Administration should enhance medical-social collaboration and **review the provision of community nurses and the support for chronically-ill elderly persons**.   They also pointed out that elderly persons discharged from hospital should be allowed to seek support by calling medical social workers or hospitals.   Also, publicity of the Integrated Discharge Support Programme for Elderly Patients ("IDSP") should be stepped up to enable more elderly persons and carers in need to learn about the relevant services.   The Administration advised that IDSP required the collaboration of frontline staff of the Hospital Authority ("HA"), social workers, geriatric teams and service providers, and multi-disciplinary case conferences would be convened to enhance communication.

Promotion of gerontechnology

11.   In 2018, the Government set up the Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care ("I&T Fund"), which subsidizes eligible elderly and rehabilitation service units to procure, rent or trial technology products so as to improve the quality of life of service users and relieve the burden and pressure on care staff and carers.   Since September 2022, the application eligibility of the I&T Fund has been expanded to private and self-financing RCHEs and residential care homes for PWDs.

12.   Members expressed concern about **user feedback on technology products**, and suggested **including specific terms** into the funding applications of service units to improve the level of user satisfaction. Members also noted that currently, the number of gerontechnology products procured and rented was low, and not many people used their CCSVs to rent technology products.   In view of this, members suggested establishing a

centralized equipment rental system to follow up on idle products and putting in place a **regular audit mechanism** to enhance the cost-effectiveness of the I&T Fund. The Administration advised that the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") would collect feedback from users and staff through site visits and questionnaires, whereas the service units would be required to complete questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of technology products, and keep records of their usage for regular spot checks. In addition, the Administration agreed to encourage the rental of gerontechnology products among service units to make full use of idle resources.

13.　　Members suggested that the Administration should set clear goals; **widen the scope of the I&T Fund to include elderly persons ageing in place**; enhance the support for households in subdivided units ("**SDUs**"); and gain a thorough understanding of the needs of elderly persons in a bid to provide technical support to facilitate the utilization of technology products. According to the Administration, some elderly persons were unable to use certain technology products due to limited living space. Service units would assess the living environment and needs of the elderly, formulate an individual care plan, and rent or purchase suitable products based on professional advice. Meanwhile, the Administration would step up efforts to promote elderly-friendly technology products and conduct regular reviews of product types.

Operational effectiveness of the Gerontechnology Platform

14.　　Members noted that the Gerontechnology Platform, currently operated directly by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, provided services such as online knowledge hub, networking, testing and research, experience sharing, etc. Members considered that **clear indicators should be established to evaluate the effectiveness of the Platform**. The Administration advised that it would monitor the Platform and submit operational and financial reports on a regular basis, and assess its effectiveness with key performance indicators ("KPIs"). KPIs were also set for digital inclusion initiatives to gain an understanding of the numbers of elderly beneficiaries, outreach programmes and training sessions. According to the data released by the Census and Statistics Department, the internet usage rate among persons aged 65 and above had increased substantially.

Development direction of gerontechnology

15.　　Members suggested **setting up an interdepartmental working group** to **promote the development of gerontechnology systematically**; collaborating with large organizations and universities to **introduce**

technology from the Mainland and overseas; and working out solutions to make gerontechnology smart and accessible. In addition, members suggested enhancing information sharing among service units and exploring connecting data of elderly persons from vital signs monitors with HA or its Electronic Health Record Sharing System. The Administration advised that it would facilitate information sharing and encourage service units to visit and exchange with counterparts to learn about the application of gerontechnology in different places.

16. In response to members' enquiry about whether policies were in place to **encourage local startups to develop gerontechnology products**, the Administration clarified that the scope of I&T Fund did not cover the development of new technology products. However, applicants could collaborate with technology companies for the trial of products designed for elderly persons or PWDs. Furthermore, a dedicated fund had been set up to provide financial support for non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") to improve their operations. With regard to the suggestion of giving priority to locally or Mainland-developed gerontechnology products, the Administration advised that this would be considered.

Drug management in residential care homes for the elderly

17. The Government has adopted a multi-pronged approach to enhance drug management in RCHEs, including legislative enhancements, standards setting, use of technology products, staff training, etc. to safeguard the well-being of RCHE residents. To further enhance drug management in RCHEs, members suggested **standardizing the dispensing procedures**, **using technology to enhance drug management** and **increasing the frequency of inspections**. The Administration responded that SWD would ensure that RCHEs complied with drug management requirements through inspections. If incidents involving drugs were detected, SWD would issue advice, warning or written remedial directions to the non-compliant RCHEs and step up inspections according to the need and risk assessment. In case of non-compliance in the handling of drugs, SWD would issue advice or warning to the health worker and might also cancel his/her registration. Eligible RCHEs could apply for I&T Fund to purchase, rent or try out technological products to improve drug management. The Administration would also study the feasibility of a universal drug management system applicable to all RCHEs.

18. Members suggested adopting the **community pharmacy** concept by dispensing drugs to RCHEs in batches to minimize errors and wastage, and **extending the scope of the community pharmacy programme and the Visiting Medical Practitioner Service to elderly singletons**. The Administration advised that the Health Bureau was exploring the

introduction of a community pharmacy programme to facilitate patients (including elderly persons at RCHEs) receiving government subsidized healthcare services outside the hospital to purchase medicines and receive professional pharmaceutical services.

19.   Expressing concern about the **effectiveness of the Training Subsidy Scheme for Staff of Residential Care Homes**, members suggested that annual refresher courses or mandatory training be organized to enhance health workers' knowledge in genrontechnology and medicines. The Administration advised that it would fully subsidize the tuition fees and provide allowances to encourage more health workers to participate. Meanwhile, the feasibility of mandatory training would be explored.

Support for carers

20.   To strengthen the caring capacity of families in taking care of PWDs, SWD provided subventions for NGOs to operate Parents/Relatives Resource Centres ("Resource Centres") across the territory, which provide emotional support and professional guidance to the parents, relatives and carers of PWDs to help them acquire caring skills, share experiences and seek mutual support in the face of stress and difficulties.

21.   Members were concerned about the duplication of services between service units at the district level and the Resource Centres, and suggested that the Administration should **review the scope of services of the Resource Centres** for more effective utilization of resources. To provide better support to carers of elderly persons, PWDs and children with special educational needs ("SEN"), members suggested **setting up one-stop support centres in all 18 districts** and **enhancing the Information Gateway for Carers** to facilitate carers' access of relevant services. The Administration advised that service units in various districts had their specific service targets and features, which complemented to each other through a referral mechanism, whereas the Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs") provided a wide spectrum of services, including specialized support for PWDs. The Resource Centres were required to achieve a specified service satisfaction rate and service outputs, including the numbers of registered family members, activities organized and counselling cases.

Support for low-income working families

22.   The Government has launched the Working Family Allowance ("WFA") Scheme to support low-income working households with long working hours who are not receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance.   Under the principle of rewarding hard work, the WFA Scheme

provides different rates of allowance based on working hours to encourage self-reliance.

23.   Members noted that more than 51 000 households were receiving WFA as at end December 2023, which was almost double the number of households receiving WFA under the former Low-income Working Family Allowance Scheme.   Members suggested that the Administration should examine and evaluate the **effectiveness of the WFA Scheme in alleviating poverty**, and explore other new initiatives to support the working poor households while **containing the growth in expenditure**.   The Administration advised that a multi-pronged approach would be adopted to tackle the problem of working poverty.

Eligibility criteria and working hour requirements of the Working Family Allowance Scheme

24.   Members urged the Administration to **relax the eligibility criteria for the Child Allowance**, and suggested that a **buffer period** for the allowance should be introduced to allow families who had temporarily failed to meet the working hour requirements to claim back the Child Allowance after meeting the requirements in order to reduce the burden on the families.   The Administration explained that apart from the Child Allowance, there were other support measures for needy families with children.   Members were also concerned that it might be more **difficult for singleton households, casual workers, families of children with SEN**, etc. **to meet the minimum working hour requirements** for WFA.   They suggested that the minimum monthly working hours for the Basic Allowance should be reduced to 72 hours and an additional tier of 64 and 144 hours should be introduced, and that families receiving **half grant for School Textbook Assistance** should be reminded to apply for WFA.   The Administration advised that it would maintain the policy of encouraging full-time employment and consider making timely adjustment.

25.   Members noted that the Labour Advisory Board had reached a consensus on "**continuous contract**", and the aggregate working hours of four weeks of 68 hours (i.e. the "468" requirement) would be used as the counting unit.   Members asked whether the relevant requirement would **have an impact on the working hour requirements and income** of families applying for WFA, and whether an assessment would be made in this regard.   The Administration explained that the "468" working hour requirement was related to labour welfare and had no direct correlation with the working hour requirements for WFA, which aimed at encouraging full-time employment, therefore no relevant study had been carried out.

Expediting the application process for the Working Family Allowance Scheme

26.   Members suggested **shortening the claim period** to one or two months and revising the **payment of allowance to monthly basis**. However, the Administration indicated that in view of the need for manpower deployment and the complexity of the application procedures, it did not intend to make any changes for the time being.   It would study the feasibility of members' suggestions of using Mandatory Provident Fund contribution information to verify applicants' income and expediting the processing of WFA applications.   In addition, members enquired about the **verification of the income and working hours** declared by applicants through a statement of self-declaration.   The Administration explained that a risk-based approach would be adopted to prevent abuse of WFA through regular random checks of information and in-depth investigations of individual applications by the Special Investigation Section.

Support for working parents

27.   To support parents in taking care of their children, the Government subsidizes NGOs to provide a range of day child care services, including Child Care Centre ("CCC") services, the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project and the After School Care Programme, to meet their different needs.

Scope of child care services

28.   Members were pleased to note that the Government had formulated an appropriate planning ratio for aided CCC service places on a population basis with a view to reserving suitable premises in housing development projects for operating CCCs, and had incorporated the planning ratio into the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines ("HKPSG") in March 2020. Members enquired whether the increase in aided CCC places would be able to meet the **planning ratio of 100 places for children aged below three per 25 000 persons**.   The Administration advised that the planning ratio had been included in HKPSG, and would be implemented progressively in new development areas.   As for developed districts, factors such as service utilization, private sector service provision, land supply, demographic structure, etc would be taken into account.

29.   Members suggested **strengthening childcare services for infants and young children aged 0 to 2**, assisting kindergartens facing operational difficulties in restructuring their businesses, and prioritizing grassroots families working in the catering industry for childcare services, to effectively support families in need.   The Administration explained that SWD planned to set up 10 more aided standalone CCCs in phases within 2024 to provide

nearly 900 additional service places, and that some places in Queens Hill Estate and Wah Ming Estate in Fanling had commenced service. Members also suggested that CCCs or small-scale child care services could be provided in **core business districts, industrial buildings, and government premises**. The Administration explained that it would be difficult for industrial buildings, etc. to meet the safety requirements set out in the Child Care Services Regulations. As kindergartens and CCCs mainly catered for children aged below two to three, operators wishing to provide services for infants and young children aged between 0 and 2 could apply to SWD and undergo the required assessment.

30. Members suggested that the **Government should operate child care services directly** to ensure service quality and **extend the School-based After School Care Service** ("SASCS") Scheme to kindergartens. According to the Administration, child care services were provided by both the Government and the private market and it was necessary to strike a balance between subsidized and private services to meet the needs of parents. In planning child care services, the Administration would take into account the demographic changes and demand, and regularly review the effectiveness of the services to decide on the way forward.

Service planning and manpower resources

31. Members pointed out that while the Government had increased the number of school-based support staff to assist children with SEN, the lack of coordination between the **Labour and Welfare Bureau and the Education Bureau** in resource arrangements had affected the effectiveness of the support services. Members called for **closer collaboration between the two Bureaux** and suggested that **on-the-job training be provided to child care workers and professionals be recruited** to further improve service quality. The Administration stressed that children aged 0 to 6 still had potential for development and should receive appropriate training in kindergartens and CCCs. A number of support services had been integrated since September 2023 to enhance the support for children with SEN.

32. Pointing out that the existing manning ratios for child care (1:6 for children aged between 0 and 2 and 1:11 for children aged between 2 and 3) were lower than those of more advanced countries and could not cope with the current demand. Members called on the Administration to **strengthen the training of child care workers and increase manpower supply** so as to **improve the relevant manning ratios**. The Administration explained that about 40% of the service fees of day CCCs were subsidized by the Government and 60% were paid by parents. Any increase in the manning ratio would lead to an increase in service fees, which might put pressure on

the parents.   The Administration would seek the industry's views on an ongoing basis and conduct constant review of the services.

Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project

33.   Since 2008, SWD has been piloting the Neighborhood Support Child Care Project ("NSCCP") in 11 locations to provide parents in need with flexible day care at the neighbourhood level, in addition to regular child care services, to foster mutual support in the community.   As at September 2011, NSCCP had been extended to all 18 districts in Hong Kong, which provided home-based child care services for children aged under nine by the home-based child carers ("HCCs") at their own residence or places as approved by the service operators.

Strengthening service monitoring

34.   To strengthen monitoring, members suggested that a **background check mechanism** should be established, including checking of criminal and child abuse records, and psychometric test should be conducted in the recruitment of HCCs to enhance service quality.   The Administration responded that the service operators had established a mechanism for recruitment and training, and all applicants for NSCCP were subject to background check and assessment on their experience and ability in child care.

35.   Members suggested that the Administration should produce a **manual and develop standard procedures** to regulate the monitoring of home-based child care services provided by the service operators.   They also requested relevant training and the establishment of a **register of HCCs** to ensure that only qualified HCCs could provide care services.   The Administration explained that in order to comply with the requirements of the Funding and Service Agreements, service operators were required to put in place an internal monitoring mechanism to cope with contingencies, and supervise the staff and volunteers providing care services to ensure the safety of service users.   SWD would conduct regular and unannounced visits to the service operators to assess service quality.

Enhancing service quality

36.   Members were of the view that the services of HCCs could be professionalized through **training, assessment and the setting of service performance indicators**, and expressed concern about the number of hours and contents of training for HCCs.   The Administration explained that HCCs were required to undergo 14 hours of basic training and 4 hours of advanced training, and the course content covered child care, child

protection, communication of special needs, etc. Service operators were also required to assess the caring skills and home environment of HCCs; provide ongoing training and conduct service evaluation on a regular basis to ensure service quality; and submit statistical information on services to SWD on a quarterly basis.

Targeted poverty alleviation

37. The current-term Government has adopted a strategy of targeted poverty alleviation by directing resources to those most in need. According to the strategy of targeted poverty alleviation, the Government has identified three target groups, namely SDU households, single-parent households and elderly households.

38. Members were of the view that the Administration should identify those who were genuinely in need (e.g. PWDs and carers), and **provide equal opportunities for the grassroots** in order to gradually lift them out of poverty and prevent them from falling back into poverty. According to the Administration, it was difficult to include "equal opportunities" in the analytical framework for poverty monitoring in the absence of a methodology for measuring it. The objective of poverty alleviation projects was not only to alleviate poverty, but also to enable the beneficiaries to escape poverty. The Commission on Poverty would consider the need to identify other target groups, and resources had been allocated for the provision of social welfare services for PWDs and persons in mental recovery. To provide **effective support for elderly singletons**, members suggested **setting up a database specifically for this group**. The Administration explained that it would be difficult to set up such a database as there was currently no statutory requirement to report a change in status to living alone, but elderly persons with welfare and care needs would be identified through the existing network.

Targeted poverty alleviation projects

39. Targeted poverty alleviation projects have been implemented to meet the needs of various target groups, including the Strive and Rise Programme, the Pilot Programme on Community Living Room ("CLR") and SASCS Scheme, and specific measures for elderly households. Expressing concern about the **financial sustainability** of these projects, members suggested mobilizing resources from the **business sector and the community** to support poverty alleviation work, and proposed to **conduct ratings on social welfare organizations** to increase transparency and boost the confidence of the business sector in these organizations. The Administration advised that it would study how to optimize the use of resources from the business sector and the community to implement poverty alleviation and social welfare work.

40.   Pointing out that the Strive and Rise Programme should specifically help mentees between 12 and 17, members suggested that the **alumni period should be extended** to maintain the connection between mentors and mentees.   Members also expressed concern about the **ongoing follow-up and support** for mentees after completion of the Programme in a bid to evaluate its influence on mentees' personal development.   The Administration advised that upon completion of the one-year foundation programme, mentees would automatically become members of the Alumni Club.   They could then participate in various activities and secure internship opportunities to help practise their skills.   Some of the alumni would be appointed as youth committee members to take part in volunteer services.   A research team from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University had completed an assessment of the first cohort and would conduct follow-up interviews with the mentees to examine their changes.

41.   Regarding the service **scope of the Pilot Programme on CLR**, members suggested expanding it to **other districts with SDUs**, **caged homes or cubicle apartments**, as well as households of **Light Public Housing** and **Transitional Housing** ("TH").   In addition, to avoid disruption of services due to lack of venues, **venue donations** should be sought from the business sector.   The Administration advised that there were three new CLR projects under the Pilot Programme, which were located in To Kwa Wan, Hung Hom and Nam Cheong.   The projects would run for three years and had commenced operation in 2024.   The Administration would actively seek support from the business sector to provide more venues. As the living environment of SDU households would be improved after their relocation to TH, it might not be necessary to provide them with services in the form of CLR.

42.   Members suggested **expanding the SASCS Scheme to kindergartens** and **extending the service hours** to 7:00 p.m. to cater for the work and study needs of parents.   The Administration responded that it would be difficult to implement the current mode of after-school care used in primary schools, but it would explore ways to assist kindergartens in providing after-school care services.

Key performance indicators for targeted poverty alleviation projects

43.   In response to members' concern about the **KPIs and assessment approach** for targeted poverty alleviation projects, the Administration explained that each targeted poverty alleviation project had its own KPIs. For example, the Strive and Rise Programme required that a minimum of 70% of the mentees achieved improvement in terms of personal development and positive thinking; the Pilot Programme on CLR required that at least

70% of service users experienced an enhancement in their living space and sense of belonging to the community; the SASCS Scheme required that more than 70% of student beneficiaries received more appropriate care and learning support so as to help reduce the child care pressure of parents/guardians.

Proposed analytical framework for monitoring the poverty situation

44.   Members expressed concern about the **method used to measure poverty** and considered it difficult to monitor the real poverty situation without formulating a poverty line.   Some members suggested using **disposable income** to measure poverty, or conducting a **longitudinal study** to observe the impact of the Government's poverty alleviation projects on the poverty situation of the beneficiaries over the following 10 years. According to the Administration, the poverty line adopted in the past was formulated based on the concept of "relative poverty", which only reflected the relativity of income.   Given the limitations of the poverty line, a "multi-dimensional" approach would be adopted to comprehensively consider income and other factors, to monitor Hong Kong's poverty situation and its changes, and to tackle social problems at source.

Supporting the development of social welfare organizations

45.   To help NGOs operating subvented welfare services in meeting their development needs, the Government launched a dedicated fund of $500 million in end-May 2024 for staff training and system enhancement, particularly in enhancing the professional knowledge of staff, strengthening awareness of interdisciplinary collaboration and promoting the application of information technology ("IT").   Members suggested **extending the scope of the fund** to include other organizations which assisted the Government in providing social welfare services, instead of being limited to NGOs.   The Administration advised that due to limited resources, priority would be given to NGOs providing subvented welfare services.   However, consideration would be given to widening the pool of target beneficiaries if sufficient resources were available in the future.

Funding arrangements and monitoring mechanism

46.   Members generally supported the establishment of a dedicated fund, emphasizing that the allocation of funds should be fair and transparent and that the vetting and approval procedures for applications should avoid abuse or minimize waste.   Members also proposed that a **mechanism for monitoring and evaluation** should be established to require organizations to report regularly on the use and effectiveness of the fund.   The Administration advised that funding for each organization would be capped

at 1% of its provisional subventions in 2024-2025 or $500,000 (whichever was higher), and a portion of the funding would be used to cover administrative expenses. SWD was responsible for vetting and approving applications for the fund, and in particular, IT-related project applications would seek input from the relevant committees. Organizations were required to submit annual audited financial reports to SWD, detailing on the amount of funding granted and the use of the Fund.

47. Members suggested that the Administration should set **clear objectives and evaluation criteria** to **ensure the effectiveness** of the fund. The Administration explained that the fund aimed to assist NGOs in strengthening staff training and system enhancement so as to implement social welfare policies more effectively and ensure the provision of quality welfare services to the beneficiaries. Organizations applying for the fund were required to set out the objectives and performance indicators for the funded projects, and submit a report upon completion of the projects to state whether the objectives of the project had been achieved and the effectiveness of the project. SWD would conduct random site checking of funded NGOs to monitor the implementation of their projects.

Staff training

48. Members enquired about the **specific indicators for staff training and Mainland exchange tours**, and stressed the need to draw up training plans that meet the needs of the organizations, thereby enabling the staff to have a better understanding of the country. The Administration explained that it would commission agency with relevant experience to organize the first Mainland exchange tour, and formulate a sample itinerary based on their experience so as to ensure that the training content would meet practical needs. Furthermore, members were concerned whether the training on the prevention and handling of child abuse cases **included the relevant requirements under the Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Ordinance**. According to the Administration, training on the basic knowledge was being provided to professionals and the second phase of training under the mandatory reporting requirements had commenced in July 2024, which would cover legal knowledge and reporting requirements. The relevant statutory requirement would be clearly set out in the relevant training system and guide.

System enhancement

49. Members enquired about the application of IT in service areas such as **smart child care or childminding**, as well as the targets and plans to promote the day-to-day use of technology. The Administration explained that organizations could make use of the fund to develop or upgrade IT

systems, thereby improving service efficiency and business management. In addition, members suggested **building an information platform** to facilitate the sharing of service data and developing IT systems for shared use.   The Administration pointed out that it had actively promoted the development of IT in welfare organizations, and rolled out a number of IT systems between 2022 and 2023, including the Voucher Information System for the Elderly.   Organizations providing similar services were encouraged to jointly develop IT systems.

Increasing welfare service facilities

50.   The Government has all along been adopting a multi-pronged approach to increase welfare service facilities to meet community needs. The Panel was briefed on the new welfare facility projects seeking funding from the Lotteries Fund ("LF") in 2024-2025 and the latest development of the projects reported in 2023-2024.

Financial sustainability of Lotteries Fund

51.   Members are concerned about the **financial sustainability** of LF, particularly when deficits were recorded in 2020 and 2021.   Considering that LF was mainly funded through the Mark Six Lottery proceeds, members suggested that part of LF's **expenditure should be borne by the Government** to safeguard the planning and provision of welfare facilities. The Administration explained that LF still had reserves at present, and it would closely monitor the financial position of LF.   Funding would be sought from the Finance Committee where necessary.   Starting from the 2024-2025 financial year, the construction costs of welfare facilities would be deducted from the premium to reduce the expenditure incurred by LF.   It was expected that four government sites would be put up for open tender in 2025 for the construction of welfare facilities.

Implementation progress of welfare facility projects

52.   Members were concerned that some of the welfare facility projects which had sought funding from LF in 2021-2022 were still in the pipeline and might experience further **delay due to the instability of LF's income or suspension of development projects by the developers**.   Members urged the Administration to **strengthen interdepartmental collaboration** to facilitate NGOs to expedite the completion of their projects, and enquired about the **measures to make up for the shortfall in welfare facilities due to project delays**.   The Administration advised that in order to streamline procedures and enhance coordination, the Director of Social Welfare personally chaired interdepartmental meetings to review the project progress with NGOs participating in the Special Scheme on Privately Owned Sites for

Welfare Uses.   In addition, SWD would provide support to NGOs at each stage, including advising on project ideas and providing templates of the required documents for engaging consultants to conduct technical feasibility studies.

Increasing allocation for child welfare facilities

53.   Noting that about 10% of the LF allocation for 2023-2024 was used for child welfare facility projects, members suggested **increasing the LF allocation** to meet the demand for child care centers and child care services. The Administration responded that the planning was population-based and facilities in the old districts were adequate to cater for the demand.   It would keep in view the statistics and population distribution to ascertain the number of facilities.

Progress of implementing the legislative proposal of the Children Proceedings (Parental Responsibility) Bill

54.   The draft Children Proceedings (Parental Responsibility) Bill ("the legislative proposal") aims at reforming and consolidating the law relating to the responsibilities and rights of parents for children, and providing for the appointment and powers of guardians, etc.   Members agreed that this legislative proposal could protect the fundamental right of children to be cared for, and stressed that it was the responsibility, not the right, of separated/divorced parents to care for their children.   Some members were concerned that the existing Guardianship of Minors Ordinance did not allow a relative to apply for guardianship of a child if the child's natural parents were still alive, and the legislative proposal would cover these situations.

Strengthening support for separated/divorced families and legislative considerations

55.   Members pointed out that the Administration had **strengthened support measures** in recent years by setting up Specialised Co-parenting Support Centers ("SCSCs") to provide specialized services for separated/divorced families in need.   Some members mentioned that **the Law of the People's Republic of China on Family Education Promotion had been passed in 2021**, which emphasized the principle of joint responsibility for family education by separated or divorced parents. Taking into account these measures and the fact that the Administration had drafted the legislative proposal and conducted public consultation as early as 2015, members enquired about the **timeline for initiating the legislative process**.   The Administration advised that given the polarized views on the legislative proposal to require parents to obtain the other parent's consent on major decisions, it was not advisable to reactivate the legislative proposal in

the absence of a clear consensus in the community.   The Administration further explained that it had implemented a number of measures to support separated/divorced families in recent years, including establishing five SCSCs; stepping up efforts to promote the concepts of co-parenting and joint parental responsibility; increasing manpower of social worker for IFSCs; and launching the Maintenance Mediation Pilot Scheme in the second half of 2024.

56.   Recognizing the controversial nature of the legislative proposal, some members suggested that the Administration should **enhance the support for separated/divorced families and step up public education**, and consider reactivating the legislative proposal when the community had a better understanding and acceptance of the concepts of co-parenting and joint parental responsibility.   Other members pointed out that the Administration had already strengthened support for separated/divorced families to address public concerns on the legislative proposal.   Given that the legislation could help protect children's rights and interests and the legislative proposal was formulated 10 years ago, the Administration should **review the relevant content to commensurate with social developments**, and while pending legislation, clearly explain the concepts of sole custody and allowing relatives to participate in child custody, etc. to facilitate public consultation. According to the Administration, the legislative proposal to require separated/divorced parents to consult their ex-spouses when making major decisions might cause distress to them, especially in the Chinese-dominated community and among the grassroots, which might give rise to more family problems and adversely affect the children.   It was therefore considered inadvisable to reactivate the legislative proposal before a consensus was reached on the proposal in society.   To keep abreast of the latest views of stakeholders, the Administration would gather the views of service users through SCSCs and IFSCs within 2024.

Setting up a maintenance board

57.   While expressing concern about issues related to default in maintenance payment and the reluctance of some parents to share these obligations, members pointed out that the Administration's **mediation arrangements for resolving maintenance disputes might not be effective.** They urged the Administration to set up a maintenance board.   The Administration explained that it had been actively considering effective measures which could be implemented in a shorter timeframe to address issues related to maintenance, and mediation was considered a more expeditious approach than legal proceedings.   The Administration would launch a three-year Maintenance Mediation Pilot Scheme in the second half of 2024 and conduct an evaluation upon its completion.   In addition, a Thematic Household Survey on the enforcement of maintenance orders is

being conducted by the Census and Statistics Department to provide a basis for future measures.

Subcommittee appointed under the Panel

58.   Two subcommittees were formed under the Panel, namely the Subcommittee on Promoting Carer-centric Policies (chaired by Hon LI Sai-wing) and the Subcommittee on Issues Relating to Policy on Monitoring and Child Protection Agencies (chaired by Hon Judy CHAN Kapui).   The two subcommittees commenced work in May 2023 and completed work in May and June 2024 respectively.

Other issues

59.   The Panel also discussed the following proposals submitted by the Administration:

(a)   **Special Scheme to Import Care Workers for Residential Care Homes**: To address manpower constraints in the residential care home ("RCH") sector, the Administration briefed the Panel on a proposal to provide additional new quotas under the Special Scheme to Import Care Workers for Residential Care Homes.   To prioritize local employment, the Administration proposed allocating additional new quotas for importing care workers to RCHs and RCHs for PWDs by batches over the next three years, with an initial plan of 3 000 in the first year, 3 000 in the second year, and 2 000 in the third year; and

(b)   **Social Workers Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024**: The Administration briefed the Panel on the legislative proposal to improve the governance of the Social Workers Registration Board; to safeguard the community's interests and national security; and to foster progressive development of the social work profession.

Meetings held

60.   Between January and November 2024, the Panel held a total of 11 meetings, including special meetings on "Social Workers Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024", and "Annual adjustment to social security payment rates, and issues relating to employment support services under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme".   In addition, the Panel scheduled a joint meeting with the Panel on Health Service and the Panel on

Education on "Mental health policy in Hong Kong".   Another meeting has scheduled for 9 December 2024 to receive a briefing from the Administration on "Enhancements to Residential Care Services Scheme in Guangdong", and "Pilot Scheme on Subsidy for Elderly Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Recipients to Reside in Residential Care Homes in Guangdong".

Local visits

61.   The Panel conducted the following visits in the 2024 session:

(a)   a visit to the **call centre of Care-On-Call Service** under Senior Citizen Home Safety Association on 8 February to understand its services;

(b)   a visit to the **Sham Shui Po Community Living Room** on 6 May to gain an understanding of its facilities, services and operation; and

(c)   a visit to the **Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children** and its **Children's Residential Home** on 19 November to learn about the latest situation following the completion of the reform project.

Council Business Divisions
Legislative Council Secretariat
28 November 2024

Legislative Council

Panel on Welfare Services

Terms of Reference

1.   To monitor and examine Government policies and issues of public concern relating to welfare, rehabilitation services, poverty and social enterprise.

2.   To provide a forum for the exchange and dissemination of views on the above policy matters.

3.   To receive briefings and to formulate views on any major legislative or financial proposals in respect of the above policy areas prior to their formal introduction to the Council or Finance Committee.

4.   To monitor and examine, to the extent it considers necessary, the above policy matters referred to it by a member of the Panel or by the House Committee.

5.   To make reports to the Council or to the House Committee as required by the Rules of Procedure.

Panel on Welfare Services

Membership list for the 2024 session

Chairman	Revd Canon Hon Peter Douglas KOON Ho-ming, BBS, JP
Deputy Chairman	Hon Doreen KONG Yuk-foon

Members

Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, GBM, GBS, JP
Hon Michael TIEN Puk-sun, BBS, JP
Dr Hon CHAN Han-pan, BBS, JP
Hon Stanley LI Sai-wing, MH, JP
Dr Hon TIK Chi-yuen, SBS, JP
Hon Stanley NG Chau-pei, SBS, JP
Hon CHAU Siu-chung
Dr Hon David LAM Tzit-yuen
Hon LAM So-wai
Hon LAM San-keung, JP
Hon Andrew LAM Siu-lo, SBS, JP
Hon Kenneth LEUNG Yuk-wai, JP
Hon CHAN Pui-leung
Hon Judy CHAN Kapui, MH, JP
Hon Lillian KWOK Ling-lai
Hon TANG Ka-piu, BBS, JP
Dr Hon NGAN Man-yu
Dr Hon TAN Yueheng, JP

(Total : 20 members)

Clerk	Ms Joyce KAN
Legal adviser	Ms Clara WONG