

**Minutes of the
Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) Meeting
held on 7 November 2006**

Present

Mr Wilfred Wong (Chairman)
Mrs Cheung Ang Siew-mei
Ms Christine Fang Meng-sang
Mr Quentin Fong
Mr Herman Hui Chung-shing
Dr Benjamin Lai Sau-shun
Dr Miranda Chung Chan Lai-foon
Mr Timothy Ma Kam-wah
Prof Tang Kwong-leung
Mr Tung Chi-fat
Ms Marina Wong Yu-pok
Mr Silva Yeung Tak-wah
Ms Lisa Yip Sau-wah
Ms Wendy Cheung (Secretary)

In Attendance

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB)

Miss Eliza Lee Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food
(Family and Women)
Ms Carol Yip Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Elderly
Services and Social Security)
Mr Freely Cheng Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare &
Food (Family)
Mrs Mary Ma Commissioner for Rehabilitation

Mr D C Cheung	Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Elderly Services and Social Security) 2
Ms Cherie Yeung	Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Elderly Services and Social Security) 4

Social Welfare Department (SWD)

Mr Paul Tang Director of Social Welfare

Absent with apologies

Dr Stephen Chow Chun-kay
Mr Keith Lam Hon-keung
Prof Japhet Sebastian Law
Mr Vincent Lo Wing-sang
Dr Jimmy Wong Chi-ho

Item 1 : Briefing on the new initiatives for the welfare area in the 2006-07 Policy Address and Policy Agenda (paper for the Legislative Council sent to Members on 12 October 2006)

Members were briefed of the new welfare initiatives in the 2006-07 Policy Address and Policy Agenda released, including the study on the setting up of a Family Commission. They were also informed of the latest position of the initiatives relating to welfare services in the Policy Agenda last year.

2. Members made the following comments:

- (a) in view of the rising trend of mental health problems in youth, some suggested that strengthening the outreaching programmes

for the young people;

- (b) work pressure might account for many of the domestic violence cases in recent years. Therefore, apart from remedial services for the problematic families, measures to improve the work environment, enhance the family functioning and promote the core family values, etc. should also be duly considered;
- (c) mental health was a cross-cutting issue that required multi-disciplinary collaboration of the health and welfare sectors. There should be a comprehensive evaluation of the existing mental health services in Hong Kong provided by different parties, namely, Government, the Hospital Authority and non-governmental organizations; and
- (d) there was concern on any overlapping of efforts between the Family Commission and other existing commissions and committees responsible for issues regarding different age groups and genders. A clear definition of “family” and division of labour among the various committees would be needed.

3. The Government made the following responses:

- (a) on outreaching programmes for youth with mental health problems, the existing services would be enhanced in future through the provision of more proactive outreaching intervention in the community for those with signs of early mental health problems;

- (b) the recently established inter-departmental task force on family education would continue to promote core family values;
- (c) a special task force under the chairmanship of SHWF and with representatives from the different sectors had been set up in August 2006 to review the mental health services provided by different parties in Hong Kong at present;
- (d) on the concern about the possible overlapping of resources between the Family Commission and other commissions and committees, the purpose of the study was to review the work of these commissions and committees with a view to achieving more effective coordination and providing holistic support to families.

4. The Meeting supported the new welfare initiatives in the 2006-07 Policy Address and Policy Agenda. Members were particularly concerned with the structure and scope of work of the Family Commission, if established, and its interfacing with the existing welfare-related commissions and committees. While there was no dispute on taking a family-oriented strategy in providing welfare services, different commissions and committees had different perspectives on issues which might not be easily tackled at family level. Furthermore, since family issues had been a major focus of SWAC in recent years, the role of SWAC in future and its relationship with the Family Commission should be covered in the study.

Item 2: Brainstorming discussions on the outcome of the study tours to Australia/New Zealand in May 2006 and North America in

October 2006
(SWAC Paper 12/06)

5. The SWAC conducted study tours to Australia and New Zealand in April/May and to the United States and Canada in October 2006. The Chairman suggested brainstorming on the findings of the two study tours, firstly on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) in this meeting and then on family-related issues at the next meeting.

6. Members made the following comments:

- (a) the client-oriented approach of employment assistance programmes in the four countries, such as tailor-made employment plans based on the strengths and abilities of individual clients, one-on-one follow up by caseworker, one-stop services, respect and courtesy to clients, etc. were very impressive. The Government should consider the feasibility of applying these approaches and measures in the context of Hong Kong;
- (b) the emphasis of mutual obligations and mentality change from welfare to work and from entitlement to personal responsibility should be further promoted in Hong Kong. The Government should convey a clear message to the employable recipients that the CSSA was time-limited and the ultimate goal was to help them achieve self-reliance;
- (c) to cultivate individual sense of responsibility, the option of introducing unemployment insurance in Hong Kong might be

considered in the long run;

- (d) the Government might consider involving more non-governmental organizations or even private sector in the provision of job placement services in Hong Kong, having regard to the practices of the four countries in which some of the employment assistance programmes were outsourced to non-profit making organizations;
- (e) some considered that the employment assistance currently provided in Hong Kong by different bureaux/departments were rather fragmented and limited. Better service integration and coordination mechanism should be pursued;
- (f) the Government should put more resources on exploring and developing new jobs for the unemployed in Hong Kong, especially the low skilled, in light of the restructuring of the overall economy. With a clear case management and placement protocol in place, employment assistance might not necessarily be provided by social workers only, but by job opportunity specialists as in the US and Canada;
- (g) in comparing the employment assistance programmes in Hong Kong with those in the four countries that SWAC had visited, we should be mindful of their differences in tax systems. The fact that people in these four countries had to pay high tax to sustain the welfare system was different from the situation in Hong Kong;

- (h) more sanctions should be imposed to reinforce the employability of the welfare recipients;
- (i) cross-boundary families became more common as low-skill jobs had been moving to Mainland China and many people in Hong Kong, especially the low-skilled, worked and lived across the boundary. Therefore, the Government should consider more measures to help these families;
- (j) apart from the able-bodied, the elderly and disabled should also be more actively engaged in employment and community work. For example, some form of honorarium could be given for those participating in community services and more practical job training could be provided to help them find jobs in the market;
- (k) the Government should strengthen job capability assessment during application of social assistance and a longer job search period be allowed before granting assistance; and
- (l) among the workable recipients, differential treatments would be needed for the hardcore recipients and those who were motivated to find jobs. Employment assistance and support should only be targeted to the latter group. For the hardcore recipients, they should be required to perform mandatory community work.

7. The Government made the following response:

- (a) it was agreed that better coordination among Government departments providing employment assistance programmes

including the Social Welfare Department, Labour Department and Employees Retraining Board should be considered. The mentality change from welfare to work and that welfare was not an entitlement should also be strengthened;

- (b) while a client-oriented approach could be further considered in the context of Hong Kong, we should also be cautious against spoon-feeding the recipients and allowing them to become dependent on the social security system;
- (c) the idea of one-stop employment service was worthy of further consideration. However, it would not be practicable for a single caseworker to look after the family and social needs of the clients, and inputs from different professionals would be required;
- (d) as regards Members' preference for a longer job search period before eligibility for social assistance, SWD now adopted a one-month waiting period;
- (e) half-day visits to the CSSA facilities of SWD, the Employees Retraining Board and Labour Department should be arranged for Members to better understand the programmes currently provided in Hong Kong.

8. The Meeting agreed that the adoption of a more integrated and client-based approach similar to those in the four visited countries would involve a fundamental change in the overall philosophy and approach of

social security system in Hong Kong. There would be substantive policy and resources implications. In view of the complexity of the review of the whole CSSA system, it was considered more practical to tackle certain specific areas and to explore the possibility of conducting a pilot scheme on providing integrated employment, retraining and social assistance services for able-bodied recipients.

9. The Meeting also shared the view that some of the overseas employment assistance measures might not be feasible in Hong Kong as the profiles of the welfare recipients were very different. The effectiveness of measures in the overseas countries was not very clear either as we did not have a chance to learn of their recipients' feedback. The major problem in Hong Kong was that many of the unemployed were middle-aged with low skills and lost their jobs due to the restructuring of our economy. It was most important to strengthen job training and develop new types of job for the unemployed. Public education on personal responsibilities and mutual obligations should also be emphasized.

10. To take the matter forward, the Meeting suggested forming two working groups each with focus on the following major areas:

- (a) conceptual change from welfare to work, incentives and sanctions to promote employment, e.g. time-limit policy and disregarded earnings; and
- (b) organizational and structural change and development of pilot integrated model.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

February 2007