

**Minutes of the
Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) Meeting**

**19 September 2023 (Tuesday) at 10:00 a.m.
Conference Room 6, G/F, Central Government Offices**

Present

Mr Lester Garson HUANG (Chairman)
Prof BAI Xue
Mr Andy HO Wing-cheong
Mr Armstrong LEE Hon-cheung
Dr Wingco LO Kam-wing
Dr Gary NG Ka-wing
Dr PAN Pey-chyou
Ms Eva WONG Ching-hung
Mr John WONG Chung
Mr Barry WONG Man-sing

In Attendance

Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB)

Mr David LEUNG Deputy Secretary for Labour and Welfare
(Welfare) 1

Mr CHONG Wing-wun Deputy Secretary for Labour and Welfare
(For discussion of item 2 (Welfare) 2
only)

Mr Tony YIP Principal Assistant Secretary for Labour and
Welfare (Welfare)1

Ms Victoria TSE Assistant Secretary for Labour and Welfare
(For discussion of item 2 (Rehabilitation) 1
only)

Miss Karen TING Assistant Secretary for Labour and Welfare
(Welfare) 1B
(Secretary to SWAC)

Mr Adams WONG Executive Officer (Welfare) 1A

Miss Sharon LAM Executive Officer (Welfare) 1B

Social Welfare Department (SWD)

Miss Charmaine LEE Director of Social Welfare

Ms Wendy CHAU Assistant Director (Family & Child Welfare)
(For discussion of item 1
only)

Education Bureau (EDB)

Mrs Conny LI Principal Education Officer (New Territories
(For discussion of item 1 West)
only)

Ms Candy CHAN Principal Education Officer (Special
(For discussion of item 1 Education)2
only)

Ms Isabel WONG Senior Education Officer (School
(For discussion of item 1 Development / Central Team)3
only)

Ms Michelle CHAN Senior Specialist (Educational Psychology
(For discussion of item 1 Service (Kowloon 1))
only)

Health Bureau (HHB)

Mr Emmanuel LAM Assistant Secretary for Health 3A
(For discussion of item 1
only)

Department of Health (DH)

Dr Patrick CHONG Principal Medical & Health Officer (Family
(For discussion of item 1 Health Service)
only)

Hospital Authority (HA)

Dr Sara HO Chief Manager (Patient Safety & Risk
(For discussion of item 1 Management)
only)

Absent with apologies

Prof Emily CHAN Ying-yang
Miss CHEUNG Sze-wing
Mr Frederick LAI Wing-hoi
Dr LAM James Joseph
Ms Alice LAU Oi-sze
Prof Petrus NG Yat-nam
Dr Ricky SZETO Wing-fu
Ms Rebecca TSAI Ching-yu
Dr Rizwan ULLAH
Prof Frances WONG Kam-yuet
Ms Wendy YUEN Miu-ling

Item 1: Support for Children in Resumption of Normalcy after the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the Chairman's invitation, representatives from EDB, HHB, DH, HA and SWD briefed Members on the key support measures to support children in resumption of normalcy taken by the Government after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Members welcomed the support measures implemented and recognised the effort made by the Government in addressing the needs of children as well as parents in resumption of normalcy. Individual Members raised the following suggestions / questions –

(a) Increasing funding support for the needy students

- i. Members appreciated the implementation of the “Quality Education Fund e-Learning Funding Programme - Provision of Mobile Computer Devices and Internet Services Support” programme by the EDB, which subsidised schools to purchase mobile computer devices for loan to needy students when face-to-face classes were suspended and e-learning was adapted during the pandemic. Considering that e-learning has become the new norm, some Members enquired whether it could become a regularised measure so as to support grassroots students with equal opportunities in accessing e-learning after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii. A Member was concerned that grassroots students gave up opportunities to participate in overseas competitions due to family financial burden. Apart from providing grants for students to attend exchange programmes abroad, which had already been covered by the funded programmes under the Home and Youth Affairs Bureau, it was suggested that the Government should consider expanding the scope of funding to sponsor the needy students to participate in international competitions.

(b) Developing statistics and guidelines

- i. Members considered that the pandemic had changed the way of living in many aspects, and these changes could be important information to formulate policies that met the needs of the society. It was therefore necessary for the Government to conduct in-depth and timely research on post-pandemic lifestyles.
- ii. Considering that the society had largely adopted online services during the pandemic, it was advised that the Government should continue to make good use of information technologies when delivering welfare services to the public, and consider to explore a wider application of the hybrid mode of servicing, including both face-to-face and online services, to cater to the diversifying needs of different people in the long run.

(c) Strengthening physical education (PE) and school-based activities

- i. One Member raised that the pandemic had exacerbated the obesity situation of students, and suggested that the Government should, with reference to the respective needs and demands of different grades, provide guidelines to schools and teachers to improve the quality of PE lessons and cultivate regular habits of physical exercise among students.
- ii. Given that the number of PE lesson hours only accounted for about 5% of the total class hours, it was recommended that the Government should consider to increase PE lesson hours for students to do more exercise and outdoor activities, thereby enhancing students' social skills and relieving their study pressure.
- iii. Given that most students, especially primary students, lacked group activities during the three-year pandemic, they might encounter difficulties to adapt to face-to-face activities after returning to normalcy. A Member suggested that the Government should formulate guidelines on school-based activities and events arrangement to facilitate students' learning.

(d) Meeting the needs of ethnic minority (EM) community

- i. In light of the challenges faced by the EM community, Members opined that the Government should formulate tailor-made measures to better pinpoint the needs of EM students.
- ii. Noting the increasing number of cross-border school exchange activities after the pandemic, a Member pointed out that EM students faced difficulties when applying for visa, in which longer application time and higher fees were expected. It was suggested that the Government should include visa application assistance as a support measure to EM students.
- iii. A Member also reminded that the Government should promote inclusive learning environment on campus so that the campus could meet the needs of each student who learnt by different ways and at different paces.

(e) Strengthening resources coordination

- i. Members generally appreciated the cross-bureaux/ interdepartmental effort made by the Government in supporting students with mental health needs. One Member attached great importance to the role of schools and parents in identifying children mental disorder cases in a timely manner, and supplemented that the Government should coordinate more resources to support schools and parents so that possible cases could be identified and referred as soon as possible.
- ii. Members raised that certain specific groups in the society, such as EM students, cross-border students, and children with special educational needs (SEN), were highly in need of Government's attention in terms of the support in resumption of normalcy. It was suggested that the Government should strengthen coordination among different policy bureaux and departments, as well as engaging non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver the measures effectively.

(f) Providing support to parents

- i. In view of the important role of parents in assisting their children to return to normal life after the pandemic, Members opined that the Government should provide adequate support and education to parents, such that they know how to take good care of their children and cope with the stress caused by the post-pandemic situation.
- ii. It was observed that the visual impairment among children was worsened during the pandemic given the rise of e-learning. Members suggested that the Government should formulate guidelines and instructions on screen time so as to educate parents on healthy usage of electronic screen products.
- iii. Members suggested that the Government should, through publicity works, remind parents to encourage their children to participate in regular and more outdoor activities after the pandemic.

(g) *Others*

Having regard to the increasing recognition of Chinese medicine (CM) in treating COVID-19 and other diseases, the Government should increase subsidies and funding for NGOs to develop CM services to make the treatment available to people from all walks of life, especially the grassroots people.

3. The Government noted Members' views, and made the following responses –

- (a) The Government was well aware of the importance of physical activities to students. To encourage students to do more physical exercise during the pandemic, EDB had formulated guidelines on physical activities to support online PE learning and teaching arrangements for schools and teachers. The Government, in collaboration with NGOs, also provided various programmes and campaigns, such as “Fun to Move@JC” project, and “Active Students, Active People” Campaign, which aimed to promote an optimised sports ambience in schools and further engage students in developing an active and healthy lifestyle.
- (b) In response to a Member's enquiry on whether there was any funding assistance for students to participate in international competitions, the Government had all along been providing various funding for different ambits to support teaching and learning activities.
- (c) With regard to the measures to support vulnerable groups who were in need of more attention and support, EDB had also devised a number of tailor-made services and measures to help these groups to return to normalcy after the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were more likely to experience anxiety and stress in restoring routine and adjusting to face-to-face lessons. ASD-specific strategies such as social story were adopted, in order to boost the students' social adaptation. Students with SEN or emotional problems during examination period would also be referred to school social workers if needed for appropriate and timely support.
- (d) For EM children groups, the Government had provided additional support services to EM parents and families through NGOs, such as organising the “Non-Chinese Speaking Parent Ambassador Scheme” and publishing “Non-Chinese Speaking Parent

Information Package” in respective languages, so as to introduce the related education services and promote positive parenting to EM parents. Parent Resource Pamphlets in various EM languages to help parents understand the needs of and support for children with different SENs were uploaded on the “SENSE” website (<https://sense.edb.gov.hk>) of EDB.

- (e) To reconnect students with campus life after the pandemic, the Government was in parallel encouraging schools and teachers to provide students with more non-academic development activities and opportunities, such as sports and music. It was believed that they could help students adapt to school life in an easier way and achieve a more balanced development between academic and non-academic fields.
- (f) The Government had all along attached great importance to mental health of the general public, including students. To this end, the Government had launched the “Student Mental Health Support Scheme”, in which a multi-disciplinary team comprising of professionals such as psychiatric nurses, educational psychologists and social workers was formed to provide support services for students with mental health needs. In addition, HHB would expedite the implementation of setting up a mental health support hotline within this year, so as to consolidate different mental health services and to provide immediate support and referral services for members of the public with mental health needs.
- (g) Mindful of the promotion of healthy screen time, DH had developed a designated webpage titled “Healthy Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products” to offer tips and advice on healthy use of internet. In addition, students would also be given to attend annual health assessment at DH’s Student Health Service Centre, which included vision assessment and they would be referred to appropriate health services for further follow up if necessary.
- (h) During the COVID-19 epidemic, CM played an important role throughout the entire process of epidemic prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. Recognising the advantages and strengths of CM, the Government was actively taking forward the construction and preparatory work for commissioning Hong Kong’s first Chinese Medicine Hospital, with a view to commencing the provision of government-subsidised in-patient and out-patient CM

services by phases starting from end 2025.

- (i) SWD had commissioned NGOs to set up 3 outreaching EM teams to proactively reach out to EM community, and connect those in need with mainstream welfare services for early identification and intervention through the provision of services. During the pandemic, the teams had connected EM community with pandemic information in their languages and anti-epidemic supplies, and arranged service referrals when necessary.

4. The Chairman thanked Members for their suggestions and views. He invited the Government to consider Members' views throughout the implementation of the measures.

Item 2: 2024-25 Welfare Services Suggestions and Priorities

5. On Chairman's invitation, Members offered the following views and suggestions -

(a) On elderly

- i. Given that many elderly opted to retire in the Greater Bay Area (GBA), a Member raised that the Government should be strategic and forward-looking in formulating policies to respond to the needs of these elderly and help them prepare for their retirement lives in the Mainland.
- ii. As regards the use of gerontechnological products, some Members suggested that not all elderly could afford to purchase a smart phone. The Government should consider introducing gerontechnology vouchers for the needy elderly to apply for purchasing smart phones, thereby enhancing their accessibility to welfare information and services. Additional support should also be provided to offer specialised courses for elderly to learn the mobile applications.
- iii. Noting that most elderly in Hong Kong, especially those at grassroots level, lacked awareness of financial planning before retirement, it was suggested that the Government should strengthen publicity and public education on the importance of pension management such that the public would understand better on the financial options and could

start early for retirement planning.

- iv. In view of the insufficient manpower supply of elderly services sector, it was suggested that the Government should explore the flexible use of innovative technologies in elderly services, especially gerontechnology, and expand support to medical technologies and gerontechnological projects, to fulfil the needs of ageing population.

(b) On carer

- i. Given that many elderly, especially those with cognitive disabilities, found themselves hard to adapt to the new environment in residential care homes for the elderly, many of them chose to age at homes. Home respite services should therefore be arranged to allow their carers to take a break and to relieve their pressures. The Government should also explore the possibilities of launching pilot scheme for home respite services.
- ii. To reduce the financial burdens on carers, the Government should consider providing incentives by introducing partial tax exemption for carers. It was also suggested expanding the “Care and Attention Place Bought Place Scheme” and the “Nursing Home Place Purchase Scheme”, with a view to increasing the supply of subsidised places for elderly and rehabilitation service.

(c) On children

- i. In terms of the introduction of “Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Bill”, a Member suggested that the mandatory reporting against child abuse cases should be incorporated into the code of practice for social workers by the Social Workers Registration Board.
- ii. Regarding the “School-based After School Care Service Pilot Scheme” under the Community Care Fund Assistance Programme, which allowed primary students to receive care and learning support in a safe and familiar environment provided by schools, a Member enquired on the implementation details of the measure.

(d) On cash assistance schemes

- i. A Member raised that some eligible Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients encountered difficulties in employment, and thus relied on CSSA continuously, creating a vicious circle. It was suggested that the Government should offer adequate recruitment services to the needy recipients to assist and facilitate their employment.
- ii. A Member noted that there had been potential abuse of CSSA, where some CSSA recipients did not declare cash or other assets in the Mainland. Acknowledging the fact that such abuse accounted for only a small proportion of all CSSA cases, a Member enquired whether a mechanism could be put in place to vet CSSA applicants' assets in the Mainland.

(e) On manpower of the welfare sector

With the increasing demand for welfare services in Hong Kong, manpower shortage in the welfare sector remained constant, if not deteriorated. It was suggested that the Government should tap into the manpower pool in the GBA cities and attract qualified Mainland workers to join the local welfare sector through setting up vocational training institutions. Training programmes that catered for the needs of the Hong Kong community should also be provided to the Mainland workers.

(f) Others

- i. In view that the implementation of welfare-related policies required a variety of resources, and that more welfare projects were raised as a result of social changes, the Government should allocate more resources to support the welfare sector, and to strive for more resources from the Mainland Government.
- ii. In respect of the suggestion to include the "Information Technology Lump Sum Grant" into the Social Welfare Development Fund, a Member enquired whether more details could be provided at this stage as to how it could assist NGOs to meet the operational information technology expenses.

6. The Government made the following responses –
- (a) The Government had set up the \$1 billion Social Welfare Development Fund to enhance NGOs' operation and service delivery, including the upgrade of information technology and the training of NGOs staffs.
 - (b) In response to a member's enquiry on "School-based After School Care Service Pilot Scheme", the pilot project would be implemented in six districts. Within the year, primary school students would receive both on-campus care and learning support after school. Depending on the outcome, the Government would consider extending the scheme to all 18 districts in Hong Kong. In parallel, SWD would continue to identify schools that could provide supporting facilities and engage NGOs to participate in the scheme.
 - (c) The Government had been liaising with related professional bodies, including the Social Workers Registration Board, when preparing for the "Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Bill" over the past two years. The threshold of reporting abuse cases involving children suffering serious harm or at real risk of suffering serious harm is in line with the spirit of the professional code of social workers. The Social Workers Registration Board supported the bill in principle.
7. The Chairman thanked Members for their views, and invited the Government to consider Members' comments in preparing for the 2023 Policy Address.

SWAC Secretariat
November 2023