

Minutes of the
Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) Meeting
held on 21 December 2004

Present

Mr Wilfred Wong Ying-wai (Chairman)

Dr Stephen Chow Chun-kay

Dr Miranda Chung Chan Lai-foon

Ms Christine Fang Meng-sang

Mr Quentin Fong King-sang

Mr Herman Hui Chung-shing

Dr Benjamin Lai Sau-shun

Mr Keith Lam Hon-keung

Dr Leung Cho-bun

Mr Vincent Lo Wing-sang

Prof Diana Mak Ping-see

Mr Tung Chi-fat

Ms Marina Wong Yu-pok

Mr Silva Yeung Tak-wah

Miss Jessie Yu Sau-chu

Ms Wendy Cheung (Secretary)

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In Attendance

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB)

Dr York Chow	Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food
Ms Linda Lai	Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Family and Women)
Ms Salina Yan	Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Elderly Services)
Mr Freely Cheng	Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Family)
Ms Sharon Ho	Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Women) 1
Ms Annie Kong	Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare & Food (Family) 2

Social Welfare Department (SWD)

Mr Paul Tang	Director of Social Welfare
Mrs Agnes Allcock	Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration)
Ms Ann Hon	Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Subventions)
Mr Fung Pak-yan	Assistant Director of Social Welfare (Family and Child Welfare)
Mrs W Y So	Chief Social Work Officer (Domestic Violence)
Mrs Y Y Tang	Chief Social Work Officer (Strategic Planning)
Mr T H Fu	Chief Social Work Officer (Subventions)

Absent with Apologies

Mrs Cheung Ang Siew-mei

Mr Aaron Wan Chi-keung

Ms Lisa Yip Sau-wah

(1) Funding for Welfare Services for 2005-06 (SWAC Paper No. 15/04)

The paper informed Members of the latest position regarding funding for welfare services in 2005-06. In 2005-06, the target of efficiency savings of welfare expenditure under SWD's purview excluding Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) and Social Security Assistance was expected to be 2.1%. In recognition of concerns of NGOs, SWD would only apply an across-the-board 1% savings for the subvented NGOs. Four items would be exempted from efficiency savings. Moreover, SWD would exempt those NGOs with recurrent annual subventions less than \$3 million after deducting the four exempted items from efficiency savings. Special consideration would also be accorded to NGOs who had genuine financial difficulties.

2. The 1% NGOs' contribution in the exercise would amount to around \$62.3 million. For the balance, savings would come from reduction in SWD expenses, phased reduction of self-care hostel and homes for the aged places, as well as other service rationalization and re-engineering measures. At the same time, new resources were being sought in 2005-06 for welfare services covering, for example, further development of elderly service, additional support services for people with disabilities and the tackling of domestic violence and family problems.

3. Members made the following comments :

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(a) the paper was silent on the way forward after cessation of the tide-over grant (TOG) in 2006-07. This should be made clear to NGOs well in advance to facilitate their longer-term service planning;

(b) on behalf of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service's (HKCSS), a Member raised that NGOs had grave concerns on the proposed further 1% budget cut, which represented an

accumulative total of 12% reduction on funding for welfare services in the past 5 years, not to mention the subvention reduction in line with the civil service salary adjustment. All kinds of measures had been undertaken by agencies to reduce operating costs and they could hardly find any more room to meet further savings. The LegCo Panel on Welfare Services had initially agreed to relay the sector's request to the Financial Secretary;

- (c) while the Government emphasized that welfare expenditure had a 160% increase over the past 10 year, much of the resources were in fact diverted to the CSSA. Subventions to NGOs for direct welfare services represented only a small portion of this;
- (d) the savings to be achieved by the sector might be better determined having regard to the situation of individual agencies rather than in an across-the-board manner. For example, it might be more reasonable for SWD to apply higher targets for large NGOs which had more flexibility and resources to achieve greater savings;
- (e) some agreed that in view of the Government's fiscal deficits in recent years, every sector of the community, including the welfare sector and service recipients, had a responsibility in solving the problem;
- (f) there was a view that the 1% efficiency savings should be applied across-the-board even for the small NGOs;
- (g) some considered that a longer-term policy framework, rather than efficiency savings, was even more important for the longer-term and sustainable development of social welfare; and
- (h) it was considered that people should be ready to accept the need of greater efficiency and cost cutting if there was a clear and shared purpose. The Bureau and Department should therefore take a more proactive role in bringing the welfare services up-to-date and redeploying savings to new service areas to meet changing social needs.

4. The Government made the following responses :

- (a) as the TOG issue was complicated, a review was being conducted separately and the Administration hoped that a decision on the way forward would be made in the first half of 2005 after consultation with the sector;
- (b) the efficiency savings target for welfare expenditure was indeed smaller when compared other policy areas under HWFB. Furthermore, SWD's share of the savings would be higher than that for NGOs. Furthermore, the amount of new resources to be injected into the welfare programmes would be far more than the 1% efficiency savings of NGOs. Detailed provisions for these welfare services would be firmed up in the context of the 2005-06 Budget;
- (c) SWD hoped that NGOs could further enhance their cost-effectiveness to meet the savings target. On the other hand, SWD appreciated that smaller NGOs might face greater difficulty and would exempt them from the exercise in 2005-06. Special consideration would also be given to NGOs who faced genuine financial difficulties;
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- (d) it was true that much of the welfare expenditure in the past few years was spent on the CSSA. Nevertheless, the importance of NGO's direct welfare services was fully appreciated. However, simply increasing government resources on more professional services might not be the ultimate solution to many social problems. Self-help on the part of the service recipients should be encouraged; and
- (e) the Administration was all for service re-engineering. However, from SWD's practical experience, service re-engineering was a lengthy process and the support of affected agencies might not be forthcoming.

(2) Follow-up on the Recommendations of the Review Panel on Family Services in Tin Shui Wai (SWAC Paper No. 14/04)

5. The paper informed Members of the recommendations of the Review Panel on Family Services

in Tin Shui Wai (the Review Panel) set out in Review Panel' s Report, including the proposed improvement measures.

6. Following the release of the Report, SWD had held discussions with relevant Government bureaux/departments and advisory bodies on the follow-up actions to be taken on the recommendations. The Administration had come up with an initial response and implementation plan.

7. While the Report' s recommendations and the Administration' s proposed follow-up actions were generally supported, Members made the following comments :

- (a) the recommendations seemed to be focused on the technical side which was not the crux of the problems. In some Members' opinion, community building was more crucial in solving the problems in Tin Shui Wai. The Administration should take a more macro and longer-term planning approach taking into account the demographic and socio-economic profile of this new town;
- (b) from a study of Tin Shui Wai conducted by an NGO seperately, it was revealed that many parents in the district still used physical punishment on their children. More family education and training should be provided to parents;
- (c) family problems might not simply arise from social and economic problems. Other factors such as medical and psychological conditions might also be contributing factors. Perhaps a more humble examination on the contributing factors should be done so as to identify the appropriate preventive and remedial measures accordingly;
- (d) there was a view that even when all the necessary improvement measures had been taken, nobody could guarantee that no such tragic incidents would happen. Therefore, public and media expectation ought to be managed;
- (e) community building did not come under the Home Affairs Bureau only but also touched upon many Government bureaux and departments. For example, SWD all along had been promoting

district and community development effectively. It was suggested that more be done from the welfare portfolio in this regard;

- (f) more resources from the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) should also be given to support community-initiated projects that encouraged network building in Tin Shui Wai without going through too much vetting;
- (g) on district welfare planning, it was agreed that the functions of SWD and NGOs should be enhanced. In addition, when SWD had developed a protocol for district welfare planning mechanism in the first quarter of 2005-06, the protocol should be brought to SWAC for further discussion; and
- (h) in strengthening professional training to frontline workers on managing family violence cases, SWD might consider extending such training to the staff of NGOs.

8. In response to Members' remarks, the Government replied that the Review Panel was also aware of the importance to look into the root of family problems and longer-term measures. However, given the time constraints, the Review Panel had decided to focus on more specific, concrete, and practicable recommendations.

9. The meeting agreed that the occurrence of the specific tragic incident in Tin Shui Wai reflected that poorly developed new towns faced many deficiencies and were much in need of attention. If the family and other social problems were not properly addressed, Tin Shui Wai might become a ghetto. The Government ought to play a more proactive role in helping this district.

(3) Briefing by the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food on his policy thinking in the welfare area

10. SHWF gave a briefing on his policy thinking in respect of social welfare after taking up the position for a few months. SHWF said that the CSSA already met the basic needs of most needy families

and individuals. However, certain individuals and families might need more targeted assistance and we would try to provide targeted assistance to them. SHWF informed Members that the Administration would keep the CSSA under review and would make reference to a basic need study carried out by the United Nations likely to be released in 2005.

11. Regarding social welfare services, SHWF felt that the cooperation between SWD and NGOs could be further enhanced. In particular, he considered that the TOG ought to be reviewed first. He hoped that a concrete decision on the way forward would be made to facilitate NGOs' longer term planning.

12. On long-term strategic directions, SHWF noted that much effort had been put into developing the strategic framework on social welfare. As the general principles for policy formulation were agreed, it was time to translate the broad directions into more concrete action plans.

13. Noting that the welfare sector would like to be involved in the welfare policy making process, SHWF considered that some form of consultative mechanism with the welfare sector could be introduced in the annual planning cycle. We might consider making arrangements for SWAC to consult the welfare sector through two sessions each year, once in April / May to seek the views of the welfare sector on priorities and new initiatives and the other in autumn when the Bureau should have formulated more concrete policy proposals and was bidding new resources.

14. SHWF continued to say that the welfare sector all along provided direct professional services to recipients instead of utilizing community resources. However, after the establishment of the CIIF for more than two years, the idea of developing social capital in the community began to take root. He hoped that the CIIF Committee would approve more applications in future and the successful models could be replicated in other districts.

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15. Members made the following comments :

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(a) it was appreciated that SHWF had pointed out the importance of social capital and community building. It would be more appropriate to examine the Tin Shui Wai incident from a community and family level;

- (b) social problems might be caused by many factors including the Government, community, family and individuals. People should be assisted to become more self-reliant and the community should play its part in building a caring and supportive neighbourhood;
- (c) in facing unprecedented fiscal deficits, NGOs needed more flexibility and adaptability to the changing environment. Their mode of operation had to be kept on updating to meet social needs. The Government should also consider ways to help frontline social workers to change their approach of helping the needy;
- (d) SHWF' s initiative to engage the welfare sector in the annual planning process was welcomed. It was further suggested that regular consultations with the sector be held every 3 to 5 years for certain long-term issues such as social capital building, services for the severely disabled, etc. Involvement of the welfare sector in district planning was also important; and
- (e) in considering the introduction of additional measures to strengthen existing district welfare planning and coordination as recommended in the Tin Shui Wai Report, we had to be cautious that such measures might create more workload for the frontline workers and streamlining of procedures might be more appropriate;
- (f) while the new model of Integrated Family Services Centres (IFSCs) in family service provision was desirable, many frontline staff had expressed concern about insufficient human resources. SWD and NGOs might consider reviewing service prioritization and division of labour on family services.

16. In response to Members' comments, SHWF made the following points :

- (a) given he had just settled down in the Bureau for only a few months, it would not be prudent for him to formulate major policies at this stage. In the meantime, some new welfare initiatives would be introduced in the coming Policy Address;
- (b) as regards the proposed follow-up actions after the Tin Shui Wai incident, he recognized that the issue was more than just a family problem. It involved other wider issues and could not be resolved by simply increasing the number of social workers in the district. The long-term preventive measure should be the building up of social capital and a caring culture among the community;

- (c) on family violence, it was indeed a very difficult issue to cope with. More training should be provided to develop the necessary expertise and professional knowledge;
- (d) it was agreed that more inter-bureaux/departmental coordination was necessary in tackling social issues. As far as those services areas under HWFB were concerned, he had some initial ideas to designate coordinators for welfare, health and medical services in each district for more effective coordination. Furthermore, consideration would also be given to creating more employment opportunities within HWFB' s portfolios, such as developing more organic farming; and
- (e) NGOs should change from providing direct services to becoming a facilitator for helping the needy. It was appreciated that some NGOs might not be ready to cope with such significant paradigm shift and the Bureau and Department would consider ways to help.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau

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