

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

**23 April 2024 (Tuesday) at 3:00 p.m.
Conference Room 3, G/F, Central Government Offices**

Present

Mr Lester Garson HUANG (Chairman)
Prof BAI Xue
Dr CHEUNG Sze-wing
Mr Andy HO Wing-cheong
Dr LAM James Joseph
Ms Anthea LEE Shuk-wai
Dr Wingco LO Kam-wing
Prof Petrus NG Yat-nam
Dr PAN Pey-chyou
Dr Ricky SZETO Wing-fu
Dr Rizwan ULLAH
Ms Eva WONG Ching-hung
Mr John WONG Chung
Prof Frances WONG Kam-yuet
Mr Barry WONG Man-sing
Ms Wendy YUEN Miu-ling

In Attendance

Labour and Welfare Bureau

Ms Alice LAU	Permanent Secretary for Labour and Welfare
Ms 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

Miss Ann CHAN Assistant Director of Social Welfare
(For discussion of item 1 (Subventions)
only)

Security Bureau (SB)

Ms Sandy CHEUNG Principal Assistant Secretary for Security E
(For discussion of item 2
only)

Miss Tiffany KWOK Assistant Secretary for Security E3
(For discussion of item 2
only)

Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF)

Mr Billy MAK Superintendent of Police (Identification
(For discussion of item 2 Bureau)
only)

Mr Ian PANG Chief Inspector of Police (Support)
(For discussion of item 2 (Identification Bureau)
only)

Mr David HO Executive Officer I (Sexual Conviction
(For discussion of item 2 Record Check) (Identification Bureau)
only)

Absent with apologies

Mr Frederick LAI Wing-hoi
Ms Alice LAU Oi-size
Mr Francis NGAI Wah-sing
Ms Rebecca TSAI Ching-yu

Item 1: Implementation Plan of the Dedicated Fund

At the Chairman's invitation, the Government representative briefed Members on the paper. The Chairman then invited Members to offer comments.

2. Noting that the Dedicated Fund (the Fund) aimed to help non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating subvented welfare services to meet their development needs for staff training and system enhancement, Members expressed great appreciation to the Government's efforts in attaching importance to and addressing the needs of NGOs even in difficult times of economic downturns, and raised the following observations / suggestions –

(a) Eligible applicants

- i. The Fund would primarily provide for NGOs operating subvented welfare services. Since NGOs operating non-subvented welfare services also faced similar challenges in the daily operations, especially on the development and application of information technology (IT) systems, the Government should consider including NGOs not operating subvented welfare services as the recipients of the Fund.
- ii. Part of the funding would be set aside to support NGOs in arranging their staff to participate in national studies training programmes. The Government could consider allowing staffs providing subvented and non-subvented services within an NGO to participate in these training programmes.
- iii. In view of the growing importance of volunteers in supporting social welfare services, the Government should also allow volunteers to participate in the training programmes of the Fund so as to promote the professional development of volunteers.

(b) Funding scope

- i. There would also be huge maintenance cost associated with IT system development in the long run. In fact, some NGOs already developed their in-house systems but required funding for upgrade / enhancement in light of the latest development needs. The Government should

consider covering the maintenance / enhancement costs required for IT systems under the Fund.

- ii. Noting that the Fund would subsidise NGOs to arrange for their employees to participate in Mainland studies programmes with a view to enhancing understanding of national affairs and awareness of national security, there were concerns that these programmes could not be differentiated from other funding schemes available in the community. Elements of social welfare services should be added to these Mainland studies programmes.
- iii. At present, most NGOs developed their own set of IT management system despite similar needs for daily operation and administration. This resulted in duplication of effort as well as wastage of resources, and hindered data sharing within the welfare sector. The Government should consider building an integrated and centralised IT platform based on common needs of NGOs and allow NGOs, both operating subvented and non-subvented welfare services, to subscribe rather than develop individual set of systems. In the long run, it could work as a mega database which would facilitate access to big data with the purpose of enhancing inter-disciplinary collaboration and maximising efficiency in service delivery.
- iv. Apart from vertical data sharing i.e. integrating individually-generated information within the social welfare field, Members saw opportunities of horizontal data sharing by a centralised IT platform i.e. allowing inter-disciplinary collaboration between the social welfare field and other related fields such as the health-social partnership.
- v. The Government should take lead in formulating top-down policy direction with a view to better coordinating IT-related social welfare policy and achieving synergy effect, with the assistance of the Joint Committee on Information Technology for the Social Welfare Sector (JCIT), which aimed to promote and oversee the use of IT in the welfare sector for better management and delivery of services.
- vi. On the observation that most NGOs might not have adequate internal controls / internal audit within the

organisation, the Government could make use of the Fund to assist NGOs in building up this fundamental function and foster the culture of good governance.

(c) Fund management

- i. It would be crucial for the Government to formulate a set of clear application guidelines, vetting criteria and timetable, and publish them timely for NGOs to prepare for application. To encourage NGOs to jointly develop shared IT systems based on service needs, the Government might consider allocating a higher score to NGOs who submit joint applications.
- ii. It would also be beneficial for the Government to share the training calendar with programmes available for “specified staff training projects” in advance, so that NGOs could take into consideration when they conducted their own annual planning of training and avoided wastage of resources in investing on similar training as subsidised by the Fund.

(d) Further support measures for NGOs

- i. To better cater for the needs of NGOs, with reference to the education sector, it could be beneficial to develop tools to identify and assess the needs of NGOs so as to maximise the outcome of the Fund.
- ii. Most NGOs had faced difficulties in the course of procurement of welfare services, especially when it came to specific groups such as ethnic minorities and SEN students. The Government should consider drawing up a designated list to facilitate NGOs in searching for suitable and qualified service providers. Best practices / good examples should also be collected and shared with NGOs for references.

(e) Others

- i. As the Fund would last for a period of five year only, the Government might consider the long-term arrangements and sustainability of the Fund.

- ii. Given the business nature of the IT industry and joint applications allowed, NGOs might end up only engaging a few sizable IT service providers for the projects. The Government should be prepared on how to avoid the situation of monopoly as far as possible and better utilise the Fund.
 - iii. It was much appreciated that the Fund was established as continued supports to NGOs after the Social Welfare Development Fund (SWDF) for the sake of sustainability of NGOs' professional development. On the other hand, NGOs should make use of the opportunity and resources to exert maximised influence in the social welfare sector, so that the Government would have motivations to continue the Fund after five years.
3. The Government thanked Members' views which would be considered as a whole to facilitate formulating details of the Fund to suit the needs of NGOs, and made the following responses –
- i. The Government was well aware of the growing demand from NGOs for IT system enhancement and had all along been working closely with relevant stakeholders in this regard, with the support of the JCIT which steered and oversaw the implementation of IT strategy in the welfare sector. JCIT had supported applications of over 600 IT projects under SWDF for NGOs in the past decade. SWD would also seek advice from JCIT for IT-related project applications under the Fund.
 - ii. With respect to the suggestion of building a centralised and integrated platform, SWD had launched several common applications in the past few years for use by the social welfare sector, such as the Service Performance Management Information System (SPMIS), which allowed service operators to submit performance data of their service units and promoted e-services in the welfare sector. However, since NGOs were operating different welfare services with different individual needs and pace on IT development, it might not be feasible and effective for the Government to set up one common IT platform that could fit for all types of welfare services / settings and operational needs of all NGOs. Alternatively, the Government considered it more flexible for NGOs with same / similar

welfare services to coordinate among themselves on developing the IT systems. To facilitate this, the feature of joint application was hence incorporated when designing the Fund. Additional funding would also be allocated to NGOs responsible for coordinating the joint project to cover administrative expenses.

- iii. With reference to the experience of SWDF, the Government was deliberating details of adopting similar arrangement for the Fund so that NGOs could provide both subvented and non-subvented staff with training to enhance their professional knowledge and skill.
- iv. On future arrangements after the five-year period of the Fund, the Government would, at suitable time, evaluate the use and effectiveness of the Fund, and consider the way forward subject to the financial conditions by then. The Government also agreed that it was crucial to increase the transparency of the Fund, and would pay attention to details when formulating the application guidelines, vetting criteria and timetable, etc., and make available all relevant information during rollout of the Fund.

4. The Government supplemented that the Fund demonstrated the Government's sincerity and determination in supporting the continual development of the social welfare sector. On the sustainability of the Fund from the Members, the Government would no doubt take into account the outcome of the funded projects and initiatives and their effectiveness in promoting development of the welfare sector in deciding the way forward. Due regard would also be given to the Government's overall fiscal position. To ensure better use of funding, the suggestion to extend the training opportunity to staff of organisations providing non-subvented welfare services is welcomed, and would ask SWD to explore its feasibility. SWD would also communicate with NGOs as early as possible in terms of the centralised staff training projects to avoid duplication of efforts. While information sharing was not the focus of the Fund, making good use of IT would be more than just an expenditure but opportunities for enhancing operational efficiency, which could in turn save cost. NGOs could make use of such savings in the on-going maintenance of their IT systems. All in all, the Government appreciated the suggestions received from stakeholders and would strive to maximise the effectiveness of the Fund with the resources in hand.

5. The Chairman thanked Members for their views, and invited the Government to consider Members' comments.

Item 2: Suggestions on Expansion of the Sexual Conviction Record Check Scheme

6. At the Chairman's invitation, the Government briefed Members on the proposed arrangements to expand the scope of the Sexual Conviction Record Check (SCRC) Scheme. The Chairman then invited Members to offer comments.

7. Members generally welcomed the expansion in light of the recent increase in cases of sexual abuse of children and mentally incapacitated persons (MIPs), and raised the following questions / suggestions –

(a) Scope

- i. At present, many NGOs relied on volunteers as additional manpower to deliver a wide variety of welfare services. The expansion, which intended to include all volunteers in Phase two, might deter some people from volunteering given the time and effort needed to apply for the SCRC. It might therefore reduce the number of volunteers and bring negative impact to the community.
- ii. Since the work arrangements for volunteers were generally flexible, and they were usually invited to participate in the activities within short notices, it would be difficult for NGOs to decide whether such volunteers should apply for SCRC. The Government should consider providing clear guidelines in this regard to avoid confusion.
- iii. Despite that SCRC would be expanded to cover all existing employees, for positions which were of limited contact with children and MIPs in daily operation, NGOs should exercise their own judgment in deciding whether SCRC should be arranged.
- iv. As regards the proposed enhancement that the Government would extend the current 18-month validity period of an SCRC account to 36 months, there were queries whether the extension would result in delays in the transfer of

information, particularly the validity of sexual offence convictions records of the employees.

- v. Noting that after expansion, individuals such as parents could also check the SCRC results of their employees, special attention should be given on the potential risk of privacy infringement about the criminal records of individuals.

(b) Application procedures

- i. Given that the expansion would probably bring in a large number of new cases, particularly after Phase two where volunteers would be included, there were concerns on how the system could handle the applications of SCRC within a short period of time and whether there could be some facilitation made for NGOs to submit mass applications.
- ii. The current application for SCRC was relatively time-consuming, and it usually took a long time to find an available timeslot to submit application through the online booking system. The expansion might further increase the waiting time and increase administration costs of NGOs. The Government should strive to simplify the application procedures as far as practicable, and set up more SCRC offices or police stations for fingerprint taking, so as to minimise time cost of users.
- iii. At present, the application fee was usually borne by either the employers or the employees. The Government should consider waiving SCRC charges as a free service.

(c) Public education and publicity

- i. The Government should attach importance to educate employers on how they could make good use of SCRC result in making employment-related decisions.
- ii. Apart from promoting the SCRC Scheme, the Government should also in parallel strengthen public education in protecting children and MIPs.

(d) Others

- i. Although SCRC Scheme was voluntary in nature, the checking could be made compulsory for some organisations and education institutions as a requirement for employment. While a positive check result might not suggest the person would re-commit sexual offences, the checking would inevitably deter his / her employment opportunities. The Government should review how the checking could strike a balance between child protection and rehabilitation facilitation.
- ii. The Government should consider allowing applicants to check their criminal conviction records without employer's documentary proofs, so as to reduce the workloads of the employers and protect the privacy right of the staff.

8. The Government thanked Members' views, and made the following responses –

- i. The SCRC Scheme was voluntary in nature. Since employers possessed better knowledge of the job nature and operational needs of each position, the decision as to whether checking was necessary should rest solely with the professional judgment of the employers.
- ii. SB had always been maintaining continuous communication with other relevant government departments, such as SWD and the Education Bureau, to provide guidelines to NGOs and assist them in the implementation of SCRC Scheme.
- iii. The fee for renewal application is lower than that for the new application. The Government would consider the needs of applicants and review the fee of SCRC from time to time.
- iv. To simplify the application procedure, HKPF would continue to upgrade the existing SCRC system and consider feasible methods, such as introducing 24-hour fingerprint-taking service in designated police stations across the territory, so as to save time for processing applications and enhance quality of public services.

- v. Having considered the possible surge of applications received by HKPF in light of the proposed expansion, the Government hence adopted a phased approach ie. implementing the expansion proposal by three phases to ensure the system capacity could manage.
- vi. In light of the large number of cases for SCRC after the expansion, the current system was designed to be expandable and HKPF would increase the application quotas if necessary.
- vii. To save application time, HKPF would introduce 24-hour fingerprint-taking service in the existing SCRC Office and five designated police stations across the territory. Upon submission of applications through the online platform, applicants would be notified of making appointments for fingerprint-taking within 14 working days. The check results would then be uploaded to the system within 5 working days as per current practice subject to passage of fingerprints' quality check. The application process would be expedited under the new measures.
- viii. Regarding the difference in criminal conviction records given the passage of time after the extension of validity period from the current 18-month to 36 months, the check results would be all along updated on a daily basis under the current practice to ensure that there would be no time lag.
- ix. HKPF would explore the possibility of allowing group applications to facilitate employers to conduct the checking in batches.
- x. To avoid any social stratification, HKPF considered it inappropriate for Government to issue written "clean record" to individuals.

9. The Chairman thanked Members for their views, and invited the Government to consider Members' comments.

SWAC Secretariat
May 2024