

**Minutes of the First Meeting of
the Joint Committee on Information Technology
for the Social Welfare Sector held at 9:30 a.m. on 31 May 2001**

Present: Mrs Carrie Lam (Chairperson)
Mrs Patricia Chu
Mrs Eliza Leung
Mr Alfred Ng
Ms Peggy Leung
Mr Chan Wing-tai
Mr Chong Chan-yau
Mr T K Kang
Mr Philip Ho
Ms Kay Ku
Ms Leung Kwai-ling
Mr Li Wai-chiu
Mr Lam Ka-tai (Secretary)

In attendance: Dr C K Law
Mr John Fung
Mrs Anna Mak
Ms Poon Hau-yuk
Mr Eric Chan
Ms Seretta Chan

Opening Remarks

The Chairperson welcomed Members to the first meeting of the Joint Committee on Information Technology for the Social Welfare Sector (the Joint Committee). She said that the Social Welfare Department (SWD) had in January 2001 mapped out an information technology (IT) strategy for the social welfare sector and had subsequently consulted the Social Welfare Advisory Committee and the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services about the strategy. Members of these two bodies were supportive of the directions laid down in the strategy and aspired to early implementation of the recommendations therein.

2. The Chairperson said that one of the recommendations in the IT strategy for the sector was to set up a Joint Committee to oversee the implementation of the strategy. She looked forward to working with Members on the IT needs for the sector and taking forward the IT strategy in the sector with Members' support.

Terms of Reference and Membership

3. The Chairperson briefed Members about the terms of reference for the Joint Committee which had been sent to Members together with the appointment letter. She said that the Joint Committee would need to oversee the implementation plan for IT investment and development in the sector, including infrastructure, communications, system applications, accessibility and humanware, and to assist in vetting applications to the Lotteries Fund (LF) for IT investment and IT projects in the welfare sector. The present terms of reference could be revised if necessary to reflect changes in circumstances over time.

4. The Chairperson said that Members of the Joint Committee were appointed ad personam. The Joint Committee was still short of one Member to be drawn from NGOs who were not members of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS). Suitable candidate would be appointed in due course.

Implementation of the IT Strategy for the Social Welfare Sector

5. The Chairperson presented to Members the actions recently taken by SWD in implementing the recommendations made in the IT strategy for the social welfare sector (Paper No. JC 1/01).

Infrastructure

6. The Chairperson highlighted that in March 2001, SWD had initiated and the Subventions and Lotteries Fund Advisory Committee (SLFAC) had approved an application for an allocation of \$26.136

million from LF to 172 subvented NGOs for replacing 1,584 personal computers (PCs) supported under the previous LF computerization programmes. She said that at the subsequent SLFAC meeting of 17 May 2001, Members had agreed to allow NGOs greater flexibility for procuring upgraded versions of the hardware and software set out in the basic specifications with the LF grant for procurement of computer sets.

7. Mr Chan Wing-tai asked whether the PC replacement programme covered every subvented NGO. Mr Chong Chan-yau enquired whether there was any time limit set for the PC replacement programme and whether the \$26 million grant was based on a known demand. The Chairperson said that the PC replacement programme was a one-off exercise to replace and/or upgrade the computer equipment provided to subvented NGOs through the previous LF-supported computerization programme. The 172 NGOs covered under the PC replacement programme were all subvented NGOs, and the amount of grant approved was based on the number of PCs supported under the previous LF computerization programme.

8. Dr C K Law asked whether SWD would in the future adjust downwards the amount of LF grant supported for a computer set, having regard to the discounts available for some software items under the Microsoft Charity Open Licence programme and the concessionary prices offered by the HKCSS' Information Technology Resource Centre (ITRC) in respect of some hardware items. He was of the view that downward adjustment of the amount of LF grant for purchase of computer sets for the above reasons would constitute a see-saw effect which was not conducive to NGOs' IT development. The Chairperson said that the budgeting for a computer set was based on the agreed basic specifications. SWD would not determine subsequent budgets on the basis of the cost of the actual hardware and software NGOs had procured with the grant. Moreover, it was agreed that NGOs might retain any "savings" from the replacement for use in other IT areas. Mr Li Wai-chiu added that the budgeting would take into account the market price for the hardware and software commonly used at the time.

9. Mr Chan Wing-tai said that the Joint Committee should be consulted when the specifications for a computer set were to be renewed.

Mr T K Kang said that while NGOs would have to satisfy the basic specifications in procuring the computer equipment, the specifications should not stifle their innovation. The Chairperson agreed and said that the present practice was to allow NGOs room for innovation rather than focus on input control. Mr John Fung said that it was gratifying to know SWD would take the market price as the basis in estimating the amount of LF grant required for the purchase of computer hardware and software. He considered this position reassuring for IT development in the sector.

Communications

10. The Chairperson pointed out that in view of the recent virus attack on welfare agencies, SWD in collaboration with the Information Technology Services Department (ITSD) and the Hong Kong Productivity Council had organized a half-day seminar on computer security for the welfare sector in March 2001. Feedback on the seminar was encouraging, and SWD was prepared to hold similar seminars in the future on IT topics of practical use to the sector. Mr Alfred Ng said that ITSD was most willing to assist in organizing seminars of this type.

11. The Chairperson said that one of the recommendations in the IT strategy for the sector was to encourage NGOs to make good use of web-based technologies to provide services. On that basis, a LF allocation of \$599,500 had recently been approved for developing an interactive computer training net for mentally handicapped persons. The Chairperson said that a demonstration of how the interactive training net worked should be given to Joint Committee Members by the time the net development was completed.

12. The Chairperson said that LF had recently approved a grant for the development of a portal site for the disabled and that SWD had given full support for an application by the Cyber Seniors Network Association to the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust for enhancing a portal site for the elderly. Mr Chong Chan-yau referred to paragraph 8 of the paper and said that he did not consider developing a single portal site on social welfare an ideal solution. He was of the view that plurality rather than unification should be the norm for the development of portal sites in the welfare sector. Dr C K Law said that funding

applications for the development of portal sites on welfare subjects were usually considered on a first come, first served basis. Subsequent applications for the development of similar web sites were often not entertained though they might have a better market orientation than the previously funded ones. Dr Law considered that as long as the development of portal sites in the welfare sector was not yet saturated, portal site initiatives should be supported as far as possible. The Chairperson said that it was necessary to make sure there was no duplication of web sites insofar as public funds were used for their development. She said that future applications and initiatives on portal sites would be channelled to the Joint Committee for advice.

13. Mr Chong Chan-yau said that web master's motivation was critical to the success of portal sites. Mr T K Kang said that while web sites used to be driven by web masters, it was nowadays getting more important for consumers or users to participate in the content development of the web sites. The Chairperson said that this move would no doubt make the web sites more sustainable. Mr John Fung said that it was difficult to define a successful portal site. The Chairperson said that evaluation of web sites should be within the ambit of research and development of the HKCSS' ITRC.

System Applications

14. The Chairperson said that initial consultations with the sector by SWD Help Centre indicated it was not cost-effective to develop core templates in respect of human resource management (HRM) and financial management for further customisation by individual NGOs. Mr John Fung said that there were both short-term solution and long-term solution to address NGOs' need for HRM and financial management systems. As a short-term measure, NGOs might purchase relevant software in the market to meet the needs. As a long-term measure, it was necessary to draw up detailed requirements for output reports and submissions. Dr C K Law said that from a cost angle, an open source strategy to developing the systems should be adopted whereas the existing concern seemed to be more on the effectiveness and ownership issue.

15. The Chairperson said that the Lump Sum Grant Steering

Committee had agreed to set up a scheme for NGOs to apply for LF for implementing business improvement projects including the setting up or enhancement of their HRM and financial management systems. In case many NGOs made applications in respect of similar systems, it was necessary to explore the possibility of shared use of the systems once they were developed. The Chairperson also pointed out the need for a system to support the collation of service statistics from NGOs. That system would be considered in the context of service performance monitoring.

Accessibility

16. The Chairperson said that SWD would focus on the elders and the disabled in its efforts to address the digital divide concern. In 2001-02, SWD would continue to provide IT awareness training for elders and disabled persons, and install PCs with Internet facilities in rehabilitation centres, multi-service centres for elders and social centres for elders. For this purpose, SLFAC had recently approved LF grants totalling \$40.722 million.

17. The Chairperson pointed out a concern about web accessibility for NGOs to the effect that of the 94 web sites owned by subvented NGOs, 81 failed to pass the Bobby test on their accessibility to the visually impaired. Mr Chong Chan-yau said that web accessibility was a best practice design standard rather than a standard which required investment of extra resources. It was more a web site design issue than a policy issue. Mr Chong was of the view that from the accessibility angle, the best way for a web site was to have a single version accessible to all rather than an additional text-only version. However, as many local web sites had been developed without taking on board the accessibility issue, a text-only version had to be added to the web sites at a later stage as a remedial measure.

18. On the Bobby test, Mr Chong Chan-yau said that it was only one of the automated tools to test web accessibility yet it was not without limitations. In his view, user test was the best and the Bobby test should not be treated as the ultimate test on web accessibility. Mr Chong pointed out that the Government had already done a lot on web accessibility. The challenge ahead was with the private web sites

including NGOs’.

19. Mr John Fung said that ITRC would help to ascertain the extent to which NGOs failed to pass the web accessibility test, and would provide necessary assistance. He explained that there was a software capable of translating Traditional Chinese into Simplified Chinese and translating the text in the web site into speech real time. In doing so, it could help resolve the accessibility problem for NGOs’ web sites. The software was installed on the server side, and there was no need for software installation on individual users’ workstations.

20. Mr T K Kang said that present-day web sites were too much driven by graphic design. He suggested that NGOs should go for practical web sites with good design rather than web sites with a lot of flash features. Mr Alfred Ng said that if necessary, ITSD would be happy to organise in collaboration with SWD seminars on web accessibility for NGOs. Mr Philip Ho said that best practice guidelines on web accessibility were available and should be distributed to NGOs for reference. Ms Leung Kwai-ling responded that guidelines of this type had been disseminated to NGOs together with a survey questionnaire on their web accessibility in March 2001.

21. Mr Chong Chan-yau suggested that compliance with the web accessibility requirements should be taken as a condition in approving grants for web site projects. The Chairperson agreed and said that measures to address the web accessibility concern should be escalated to a more prominent profile. She suggested that SWD and ITRC put together a plan to provide some tangible assistance to NGOs on web accessibility. If necessary, some capital funding from LF could be considered to finance the measures.

Humanware

22. The Chairperson said that the Social Work Training Fund (SWTF) had launched a funding exercise in 2000-01 to encourage NGOs to strengthen the IT training of their registered social workers for better delivery of services and communication within the sector. A total of \$456,881 was granted to 16 NGOs (involving 27 applications) in that

exercise. The SWTF had recently issued invitation to NGOs for another round of applications for the same cause for 2001-02.

23. The Chairperson said that the IT strategy for the social welfare sector recommended encouraging IT professionals to serve as volunteers and take up honorary positions as IT advisers in NGO management boards. Ms Leung Kwai-ling reported that SWD had been in touch with four professional bodies in the IT industry and had obtained their initial support for the scheme. SWD had also sourced some NGOs who were interested in participating in the scheme. Ms Leung said that to take the scheme forward, SWD would start with a small number of NGOs and proceed with the matching of volunteer IT advisers with NGOs.

24. Mr Chan Wing-tai said that the social welfare sector was in lack of “interfacing” people, i.e. people who had knowledge and skills of both social work and IT. He considered that even though some NGOs were willing to participate in the volunteer IT advisers scheme, it was necessary to take on board the interfacing dimension and clarify their expectations. In his view, it was important to involve relevant tertiary institutions in promoting the use of IT in the sector. Mr T K Kang agreed and said that in 1992-95, there had been annual “IT week” events which provided a platform for communication between IT professionals and social welfare agencies and recruitment of volunteers for welfare agencies’ IT projects. The Chairperson said that the volunteer IT advisers scheme was launched in the context of the International Year of Volunteers. It should start at a pace in line with the level of readiness of the participating NGOs.

25. Dr C K Law said that there were three levels of IT training for the welfare personnel, namely basic training as the first level, interfacing as the second level and expert knowledge and skills as the third level. He considered that welfare personnel with the second and third levels of IT training were generally lacking in the sector. Dr Law suggested that some subsidy be provided to the welfare personnel for undertaking suitable IT training courses with a view to encouraging self-initiated IT training in the sector. Ms Leung Kwai-ling said that at a recent meeting of the Advisory Committee on Social Work Training and Manpower, she had briefed representatives from tertiary institutions about the IT strategy

for the welfare sector and there had been discussion about the levels of IT training for social workers. Representatives from tertiary institutions were interested to know more about the progress of the implementation of the IT strategy.

26. The Chairperson said that many IT courses offered by the schools of continuing studies or the social work departments of local tertiary institutions had been chosen for sponsorship under the SWTF to expand social workers' IT training opportunities. She advised that the SWD Training Section should source appropriate IT training courses and widely disseminate the information to NGOs for application for sponsorship.

Management and Promotion of IT

27. The Chairperson said that a LF grant had been approved to finance the three-year operation of a functional unit within HKCSS to provide a range of IT services to NGOs. As it was necessary to closely monitor the operation of the functional unit and review the justifications for its continued existence with public funds, SWD would conduct a mid-term evaluation of the functional unit after its operation for 12 months. The Chairperson said that SWD would tap Members' assistance with the evaluation in due course.

28. The Chairperson suggested and Members agreed that the Joint Committee's deliberations should be made transparent to NGOs. The agenda, papers and minutes for the Joint Committee's meetings would be uploaded on to the SWD homepage for general information.

Work Plan of the Functional Unit within the Hong Kong Council of Social Service

29. The Chairperson referred Members to Paper JC 2/01 and the work plan submitted by HKCSS in respect of the functional unit. She said that the functional unit would commence operation on 1 June 2001 and would provide IT services to NGOs in four areas, namely Research and Development (R&D), Supplies, Technical Consultation and Support,

and On-site Maintenance.

30. Mr John Fung gave a PowerPoint presentation on the work and staffing structure of the functional unit. He said that the functional unit was named ITRC as it was very much an extension of the HKCSS' existing Resource Centre on IT. Since mid-February 2001, HKCSS' Resource Centre on IT had started sales activities in respect of computer hardware and software. Mr Fung said that 238 purchase orders had to date been placed with a business volume of \$6.7 million. Because of the Microsoft Charity Open Licence programme, about \$10 million savings had been achieved for NGOs in the sector. Mr Fung considered it important to establish well-defined performance indicators and reasonable targets for ITRC. He said that ITRC's performance should not be simply based on the sales volume but rather it should be measured as a percentage against the total IT expenditure of the sector with the period.

31. Mr Chong Chan-yau said that ITRC's sales activities were only a sideline as compared with R&D and system support, though they brought in good revenue and offered short-term assistance to NGOs. He felt that the ITRC should not place too much emphasis on such sales activities. Mr Chong considered that a strong helpdesk support was of longer term assistance to NGOs and should not be overlooked. The Chairperson said that the ITRC staffing structure had already taken care of the need for provision of different kinds of IT services for NGOs. Mr John Fung said that ITRC would not treat sales activities as its major work and would work with SWD on the ITRC performance indicators.

32. On R&D activities, Mr John Fung said that ITRC was looking into the financial report requirements under the Lump Sum Grant environment and was assisting some NGOs with their IT solution proposals. HKCSS was also developing e-learning with its Manpower and Training Department and conducting a web accessibility research with the Equal Opportunities Commission. The Chairperson said that the R&D function should not be considered from a commercial angle and that funding requirements for this function should come from the SWD recurrent subvention to HKCSS following its re-positioning. She explained that SWD had supported only the first year funding for R&D

but had included the second year cost in the contingencies of the LF grant for disbursement to HKCSS in case that could be justified.

33. Mr Chan Wing-tai said that R&D was so important an area that it warranted more proactive work and the building of a strategic alliance with not just IT vendors but also tertiary institutions. Dr C K Law said that tertiary institutions had been invited to take part in organizing the 7th Conference on Human Services Information Technology Applications to be held in Hong Kong in 2003.

34. Mr Alfred Ng enquired about the mode of collaboration between ITRC and SWD on the development of IT in the welfare sector. The Chairperson said that ITRC had a role to provide advice and support to the Joint Committee in terms of IT development for the sector largely through its R&D. However, ITRC was required to compete for business from either SWD or NGOs on a fee for service basis. There was no favouritism towards ITRC as it was not the sole supplier of hardware and software to NGOs.

Internet Access Provision for Non-Government Organisations in the Welfare Sector

35. The Chairperson referred Members to Paper JC 3/01 for a proposal on the provision of Internet access for NGOs in the welfare sector. She stressed that all welfare NGOs, subvented or non-subvented, were covered under the proposed three-year provision of Internet access. NGOs would have to apply to LF for Internet access rather than await allocation as a given. The Chairperson said that a detailed plan to implement the proposal had yet to be worked out.

36. Dr C K Law said that the implementation plan on Internet access provision should allow NGOs flexibility in deploying the resources for the purpose of building Internet connection for their agencies. Care had to be taken not to stifle NGOs' initiatives or let NGOs feel penalized for their advancement in the use of IT. Dr Law was of the view that even though some NGOs might already have Internet connection with their own resources, their need for IT support should be

recognized and they should also be given partial or full funding support upon their application for Internet access resources under the scheme. The Chairperson said that while there was no intention to disqualify NGOs which had already established their Internet connection from applying for funds under the scheme, lest such an approach might stifle all self-initiated initiatives in future, some form of prioritization in funding allocation might be necessary if the demand significantly outstripped the availability of funds.

37. Mr Chong Chan-yau asked about NGOs' demand for Internet connection. Ms Leung Kwai-ling said that it was difficult to obtain exact figures on the demand having regard to the large number of NGOs in the sector. It was therefore necessary for NGOs to raise their own requests and apply for Internet access provision. Mr Chong said that NGOs with Internet connection had already obtained their returns such as efficiency in communicating with others. He suggested that the scheme should consider supporting those NGOs for possible upgrade from dial-up connection to broadband service. The Chairperson agreed to consider this option.

38. Mr T K Kang said that the provision of Internet access to NGOs was crucial to the use of IT in the social welfare sector. In view of the high cost of developing intranets, Mr Kang suggested that funding be given to NGOs for broadband Internet connection and that NGOs might set up broadband access servers at their backend to host email accounts for their service units. He reckoned that broadband Internet connection should be provided to NGO headquarters while allowing NGOs flexibility to arrange dial-up or broadband service for their service units.

39. Mr John Fung said that there were many ways for Internet connection set-up and that the cost was not so high even for providing Internet access for all NGO staff. The main difficulty, as he saw it, was to lay down clear and fair criteria for LF grants to NGOs on Internet access and to provide NGOs flexibility in using the grant for Internet connection within their agencies. The Chairperson pointed out that the objective of the proposal was to provide Internet access for NGO headquarters and each of their service units over a three-year period upon

their application and was not meant to cover all NGO staff.

40. Mr Chong Chan-yau asked whether it was possible to include Internet access for subvented NGOs as an ongoing subvented item while prescribing a three-year provision of Internet access for non-subvented NGOs. The Chairperson considered it inappropriate for two reasons. First, LF could not be used for recurrent expenditure purpose; nor did SWD have resources for such recurrent subvention. Second, it was not desirable to have different treatment for subvented and non-subvented NGOs as far as the use of IT was concerned. As the Chairperson saw it, many non-subvented NGOs were doing as well as subvented ones in providing services to the public. Rather, she considered it necessary to prioritise the use of LF for Internet connection taking into account the \$60 million earmarked for this purpose. The Chairperson invited Mr T K Kang, Mr Chan Wing-tai, Mr John Fung and Ms Leung Kwai-ling to form a task group to draw up a feasible implementation plan for Internet access for NGOs, and suggested that the proposed implementation plan be circulated to Joint Committee Members.

41. Ms Kay Ku asked about the coverage of bona fide NGOs under the Internet access provision scheme. The Chairperson said that SWD had a list of subvented and non-subvented non-profit-making NGOs providing welfare services. Ms Ku undertook that she would provide an up-to-date list of NGOs who were HKCSS members.

Use of Lotteries Fund for Information Technology Initiatives

42. The Chairperson referred Members to Paper JC 4/01 on the use of LF for IT initiatives in the welfare sector. She pointed out that a total of \$76 million from LF, as against the initial estimate of \$60 million in the forecast of LF expenditure, had to date been allocated for implementing the recommendations set out in the IT strategy for the sector.

43. The Chairperson said that all IT projects would be considered on a project-by-project basis and assessed against the parameters set out in paragraph 4 of the paper. The parameters were generic requirements

for IT projects, and the list was not exhaustive. Special parameters could be considered for individual projects if the circumstances warranted it. Mr Chong Chan-yau suggested that the parameters should include benefit to users including the disadvantaged groups and the feasibility of the project. The Chairperson agreed to include user benefit in the assessment parameters, and said that all projects supported by the Joint Committee had to be feasible in the first instance.

44. The Chairperson said that there were two IT projects lodged under an earlier SWD invitation on the proactive use of LF well before the drawing up of the IT strategy for the welfare sector. Both projects were by and large within the assessment parameters. At this juncture, Ms Kay Ku declared her interest in respect of the web-based Social Welfare Information Kit (SWIK) Online project.

45. Mr Lam Ka-tai briefed Members about the web-based SWIK Online project and its features. He pointed out that with the newly developed online updating features, individual NGOs were able to update online their agency information and post their programme activities on to the web-based system at any time convenient to them. The public as well as NGOs themselves could then access up-to-date information on social welfare agencies free of charge through Internet.

46. The Chairperson said that the homepage for care-givers had some similarity with the portal site for elders to be enhanced by the Cyber Seniors Network Association. However, the project was considered worthy of support as the applicant agency for the care-givers homepage had rich experience in providing community support for care-givers, and the homepage would focus more on the needs of care-givers and disseminate information pertinent to their concern. Such an approach would also be in line with Members' views that we should not discourage the production of diversified web sites at the beginning of the IT development process in the sector.

47. The Chairperson suggested and Members agreed that these two projects were worth supporting and should be submitted to SLFAC for funding approval. The Chairperson said that there was no need to pend the submissions on these two projects until the next SLFAC meeting

scheduled for July 2001. SLFAC papers relating to these two projects should be circulated to SLFAC Members for funding endorsement.

(The Chairperson left the meeting at this juncture for an appointment for 12:30 p.m.)

E-Learning

48. Mrs Patricia Chu referred Members to Paper JC 5/01 for the background to the Child Protection Training Online (CPTOL) which was an e-learning initiative of SWD. She said that CPTOL would be launched on 1 June 2001 with SWD caseworkers as the target users.

49. Mrs Anna Mak gave a presentation of CPTOL and highlighted the salient features of the training package. Dr C K Law considered that the initiative was good but consideration should be given to the long-term synergy of similar initiatives in the future. As he saw it, the design of CPTOL was not particularly suitable for training and learning purpose as there was much flashing design on the screens which would easily distract users' attention. Dr Law suggested that as long-term investment and strategy for online teaching and learning, e-learning tools such as WebCT should be deployed for developing staff training and development packages. The long-term cost would be much reduced as even non-technical people could maintain regular update of the training content and materials with the e-learning tools. Dr Law was of the view that SWD might consider cooperating with tertiary institutions for developing online learning packages with the use of e-learning tools and having the e-learning sites hosted by tertiary institutions concerned.

50. Mr Chan Wing-tai said that the SWD Training Section might consider purchasing the WebCT tool for developing e-learning packages in the long run. Mr John Fung said that there were a number of e-learning tools in the market. HKCSS was considering using such tools for developing training courses through the Internet.

51. Mr T K Kang said that online access facility should be considered to enable individual trainers to update the content of the

e-learning site. Pre-test and post-test should be provided with a view to sustaining users' interest in going through the learning package. Mr Philip Ho said that consideration should also be given to the security issue relating to e-learning such as user authentication in the logon process.

52. Mrs Patricia Chu thanked Members for their views and suggestions. She said that SWD would consider cooperating with tertiary institutions and HKCSS on future e-learning initiatives where appropriate.

53. There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 12:50 p.m.

Social Welfare Department
June 2001