

## LCQ2: Cases of child maltreatment

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Tik Chi-yuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (February 26):

Question:

The Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Ordinance (the Ordinance) will take effect on January 20 next year. According to the data of the Child Protection Registry Statistical Report, the number of maltreatment cases involving children with disabilities is rising rapidly. For example, the number of children with disabilities who had been subjected to sexual abuse increased from 125 in 2022 to 175 in 2023. There are views pointing out that this trend attracts little media coverage or attention, and the actual situation of child maltreatment is not well-known. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as there are views pointing out that some victims of child maltreatment cases choose to cover up the incident and refrain from reporting to the Police or the Social Welfare Department's Family and Child Protective Services Unit, given the "secondary damage" caused to them by the fact that they have to recall the course of the incident when facing judicial proceedings (e.g. taking statements and giving evidence in court proceedings), how the Government will deal with such situation upon commencement of the Ordinance; whether it will consider amending the legislation to mitigate the secondary damage caused to the victims; if so, of the timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given the increase in the number of child maltreatment cases (especially sexual abuse), whether the Government has conducted any in-depth investigation into this trend; if so, of the main reasons for such trend according to the findings of the investigation; whether it has formulated preventive measures targeting schools or youth groups;

(3) as it is learnt that children with mental and physical disabilities are the major group of victims of child abuse cases involving children with disabilities, whether the Government has provided additional resources or protective measures to address the special needs of this group of people;

(4) as the Secretary for Labour and Welfare has pointed out that the anticipated number of reported child abuse cases will increase substantially after the commencement of the Ordinance, whether the Government has sufficient resources to support child victims, such as enhancing the relevant psychological counselling, placement and rehabilitation mechanisms;

(5) whether it will consider setting up a dedicated committee or organization to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of the Ordinance, coordinate the relevant policies and initiatives, and regularly disclose to

the public the data on case reports and the effectiveness of its efforts in handling the cases; and

(6) as it has been reported that the Budget is going to propose a reduction in the funding for social welfare organisations, how the Government will tackle an increasing number of child maltreatment cases in the light of reduced funding and shortage of social workers, and whether it has estimated the average number of relevant cases that each social worker will need to handle after the reduction in funding?

Reply:

President,

The Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Ordinance (the Ordinance) mandates specified professionals in the social welfare, education and healthcare sectors to report serious child abuse cases, creating a comprehensive and effective protection web for children and sending a strong deterrent message to potential perpetrators that their abuse behaviours will be easily exposed. The consolidated reply to the Member's question, in consultation with Education Bureau (EDB) and Security Bureau (SB), is as follows:

(1) Various government departments and the Judiciary have been protecting child victims and witnesses through administrative procedures, guidelines and measures to encourage and facilitate them to report and give evidence in child harm/abuse cases and to lessen their trauma in the process. The Social Welfare Department (SWD), in collaboration with the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) and the Judiciary, has taken a number of measures to protect children. For example, during criminal investigations, the relevant departments may arrange children to give evidence through video-recorded interviews (VRI) in appropriate circumstances. These VRIs are conducted in a comfortable home-like environment by specially trained police officers, social workers, and/or clinical psychologists. The video-recorded evidence can be admitted as valid evidence at the trial, saving the children from recounting the incidents in the courtroom, thereby alleviating their embarrassment and trauma. During trials, the children can enter and exit court rooms through special access. In addition, they can also testify in another room by means of live television link in the company of trained witness-support persons to avoid facing the defendant and the public directly, thereby alleviating their psychological stress. In addition, the HKPF and the Department of Justice jointly established the Vulnerable Witness and Child Protection Task Force in 2022 to speed up and improve the evidence collection, prosecution and follow-up investigation work with collective efforts. The SWD and the HKPF will continue to organise training courses and review the procedures for handling sexual violence cases to enhance the skills and sensitivity of different professionals in order to effectively assist child victims and ensure that they receive appropriate protection and support.

(2) Through the Child Protection Registry, the SWD has been collecting and compiling statistics on information of registered cases involving children

who have been harmed/abused or currently at risk of being harmed/abused. The annual statistics are uploaded onto the SWD's website for public reference. There were 1 367 newly registered child protection cases in 2021 and 1 457 cases in 2023, representing an increase of about 6.6 per cent in three years. Among them, there were 448 sexual abuse cases in 2021 and 509 sexual abuse cases in 2023, representing an increase of about 13.6 per cent. According to the SWD's analysis, possible reasons for the increase in registered cases include: growing public awareness on child protection and more proactive reporting of cases as a result of the legislative exercise of the Ordinance as well as publicity and public education on child protection in recent years; more children are using social media, messaging apps, chat applications, or online games in recent years; and children having more opportunities to interact with others in resumption of normalcy after the epidemic.

On publicity and education in the community, the SWD has been launching the publicity campaign on "Strengthening Families and Combating Violence" to raise public awareness on child protection and prevention of domestic violence and encourage those in need to seek help early through large scale publicity events and district-based activities. In 2022, the SWD has produced a series of videos on "Heart and Hut Classroom: Online Sexual Abuse Pitfalls" and broadcasted on social media to remind young people and parents of the risk factors, prevention and handling of online sexual abuse. The HKPF has been organising the "Let's T.A.L.K. Child Protection Campaign" every year since 2021 to raise public awareness of child protection through a series of publicity and promotional activities. In addition, the HKPF organised a multi-disciplinary seminar on "Child Sexual Abuse in the Cyber World" on March 21, 2024, together with experts and representatives from relevant sectors and discussed with more than 500 parents, principals, teachers, social workers, Police officers and child service workers online and offline on how to effectively protect children from online sexual crimes, thereby enhancing their understanding of children's online safety and their awareness and response capabilities to protect children from such crimes, and promoting collaboration among different professions.

In respect of preventive work targeting schools or youth groups, the EDB has all along been assisting schools in the prevention, early identification and appropriate intervention of suspected child abuse cases through various measures. These measures include issuance of circulars and guidelines requiring schools to devise relevant mechanisms, procedures and measures to handle such cases; strengthening school social work service to assist schools in the early identification of suspected abused students and potential issues in their families; encouraging schools to implement Comprehensive Student Guidance Service, under which all teachers collaborate with school social workers, other student guidance personnel or specialists to provide comprehensive and extensive guidance service to students in need; as well as supporting schools to adopt a whole school approach, through cross-sector collaboration among professionals from different disciplines in schools (including student guidance personnel, school social workers and school-based educational psychologists), to intervene and follow up as early as possible, and to provide students with appropriate support. At the same time, the EDB

actively promotes the "Positive Parent Campaign" to foster parents' positive attitude and understanding in nurturing their children, so as to enable students grow up healthily and prevent child abuse incidents. In addition, the EDB has been working closely with the SWD and the HKPF to organise various training activities with a view to strengthening school staff's knowledge, skills and abilities in handling suspected child abuse cases.

(3), (4) and (6) The Government has allocated an additional provision in 2023-24 for enhancing the Government's enforcement and support capacity, providing appropriate training to practitioners in the relevant professions and strengthening the promotion and public education work on child protection, with a view to supporting the implementation of the mandatory reporting regime (MRR) for child abuse cases.

The Government has further allocated an additional provision in 2024-25 to increase emergency places for residential child care service and strengthen professional support for child abuse victims and their families to prepare for the potential increase in the reported child abuse cases upon the implementation of the MRR. Among which, two new residential child care centres will commence operation before the Ordinance comes into effect, offering a total of 96 additional service places each year and are expected to provide emergency placement for 384 children in need (in the estimation that each place of residential child care centre can take care of 4 children on average per year).

The SWD will also strengthen the professional support to actual or suspected child abuse victims (including pre-primary children with special needs) and their families. Starting from March 2025, the SWD will subsidise non-governmental organisations to implement various child protection support services, including Home Visitation Support, therapeutic/psycho-social groups, educational and family enrichment activities, to complement the work of social workers of the Family and Child Protective Services Unit of the SWD or related casework service units in providing focused support services for children and families in need.

Child protection (including pre-primary children with special needs) work and cases are being handled and followed up in a multi-disciplinary manner (including social welfare, education, law enforcement, healthcare). Professionals from different service units, including social workers, work together to provide professional support to children and families in need. The SWD does not maintain information on the average number of child protection cases handled by each social worker.

(5) The Labour and Welfare Bureau, the EDB, the Health Bureau and the SB have formed a Cross-bureaux Working Group to make preparations for the implementation of MRR in January next year. The SWD and the HKPF are jointly developing the internal work flow and mandatory reporting platform to facilitate mandated reporters in making reports and collecting relevant data, ensuring efficient and effective follow-up on reported cases. Relevant bureaux and departments will continue to monitor the operation of MRR and the trend of the number of reports after its implementation. The number of cases

reported through the MRR will be incorporated into the statistics of the Child Protection Registry and disseminated to the public.