

FOCUS

Strengthening Governance in Crisis

Interview with Mr Tai Keen-man, Vice-Chairman & Acting Executive Director of Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council



Mr Tai (right) and then Chairman Dr David Tsang explaining the special committee's report to the media



As Acting Executive Director, Mr Tai (fourth left) receiving visitors at service unit.

Media veteran Mr Tai Keen-man joined the Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council (NAAC) in 1995 as a member of the Mainland Service Sub-committee, and later the Executive Committee (ExCo), overseeing the organization's operations and development.

NAAC is one of the five agencies receiving the most Lump Sum Grant (LSG) subvention in 2016/17, of over HK\$400 million, accounting for 2/3 of its income. In 2014, to utilize its high level of LSG reserve, NAAC implemented schemes on employee benefits and developed extra short-term projects. However, these initiatives soon became financial burdens that the agency decided in September 2017 to cut the short-term projects launched and the temporary positions earlier than scheduled. This decision led to great concern within and outside of NAAC. The ExCo then set up a special committee of 11 people with two independent members, where Mr Tai led as Chair, to investigate on the finances and remediate the situation.

A report was published on NAAC's website last October that the ExCo retrieved the decision to mitigate the damage. "Looking back, we learned that 'short-term projects are never short, temporary staff are never temporary'. Whenever there is a need, we will try to address. The agency must ensure there is long-term support for new services," said Mr Tai.

He was most impressed by the support from ExCo Members and the staff. He said, "Despite the trauma, I am thankful that they rallied and did not point fingers at each other. We used to meet every quarter, but

now, every three to four days. While the incident put the organization in huge pressure, the special committee helped us focus. We believe that if ExCo Members commit, so will the staff. I was also touched by our staff's action to raise fund for the agency." In hindsight, he felt that ExCo Members could have been more proactive in taking the lead and considering alternative solutions.

Apart from liaising with the Social Welfare Department, communication with staff is very important. He emphasized, "the staff is crucial to an organization. We had clear minutes for our staff meeting about the incident. We also met with staff concern groups and set up dedicated email to collect their views. All staff was notified before releasing any information to the public."

Mr Tai now has a better understanding of the staff after the incident. To avoid affecting the operation, Mr Tai took up the role as Acting Executive Director on a pro bono basis in January 2018. "The incident reflected that governors had overly relied on the long-serving Executive Director without enough communication—we only knew about the incident on the day of media's report and without full grasp of all information. With the huge reserve in previous years, we became unguarded. Though finance and other committees were in place, there was no precise analysis of the finances, which made the incident inevitable. It is important that ExCo and management should keep at arm's length with respective roles - ExCo should govern while management should take care of daily operations, implement policies, and report back." As Acting Executive Director, Mr Tai is now focusing on reviewing internal policies for providing effective services.

View video for Mr Tai's experience sharing on crisis management: <https://governance.hkcss.org.hk/node/239>