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LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

Review of Family Welfare Services

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the findings and recommendations of the Review of Family Welfare Services and the Administration's response to the recommendations made by the Consultants.

Background

2. Members considered a paper on this subject at the meeting held on 12 June 2000 and noted the progress on work of the Review on 12 March 2001. In those discussions, some Members suggested that a wider perspective in supporting families should be adopted, that need for interfacing with different kinds of services should be examined and that measures should be undertaken to enhance the resilience of families. In addition to taking these views on board, the study team also consulted as widely as possible in accordance with Members' advice. Thus, in addition to interviewing over 350 stakeholders, the Consultants also met with women's groups and labour unions to gather their views.

3. The findings and recommendations of the Review are contained in the Report entitled "Meeting the Challenge : Strengthening Families", a copy of which has been passed to the Legislative Council Secretariat for Members' reference. An Executive Summary is attached to this paper for Members' reference. This paper highlights the Consultants' major recommendations to re-focus family welfare services to meet the needs of today's families and the Administration's response to those recommendations.

Changes in Family Needs

4. Family solidarity in our society has been eroding in recent years due to rapid demographic, social and economic changes. This, coupled with financial and job insecurity, has resulted in an increasing incidence of marital breakdown and divorce and rising number of social pathological incidents such as child abuse and spouse battering. Problems of our young people, mental health concerns, adjustment and integration difficulties experienced by some new arrival and single parent families, feeling of alienation of families moving to new towns, stress felt by carers in taking care of their elderly and disabled family members are some examples which signify the changes that have taken place in our family structure and family needs. The Consultants have reviewed a variety of problems and needs facing families in Hong Kong and recommended prioritization of these needs for provision of service and appropriate level of intervention.

Problems Identified in Service Delivery and Areas for Improvement

5. Family welfare services are historically the most basic social welfare service, meeting a diversity of social needs, ranging from material assistance, service support, to clinical assessment and individual counselling. In particular, Family Service Centres are the first line of assistance, supported by other services covered in this Review and many others. The Consultants have concluded that these family service programmes provided by both the Social Welfare Department and non-government organizations¹ are in many ways meeting people's needs and have become more pro-active in developing partnerships with other social services and community organizations, whilst also attempting to reach out to hard-to-reach families. Many examples of innovative and good practices are identified.

¹ There are 42 Family Services Centres run by SWD, 23 by NGO; while 6 Family Life Education workers are with SWD, 73 are with NGOs. There are 5 Senior Social Work Practitioners in SWD, 1 in NGO; 34 Family Aides are with SWD, 10 with NGOs. 19 Family Activity and Resource Centres are run by SWD, 4 are run by NGO. 2 Family Education projects are provided by SWD and 3 are provided by NGOs. While SWD runs the Family Care and Demonstration Resource Centre, all the 5 Single Parent Centres and 8 Post-migration Centres are all provided by NGOs.

6. However, the Consultants have observed a number of problems. Although family service programmes are generally meeting people's needs, many of them have been described as one of the most over-loaded and over-stretched welfare services in the field. There are gaps as well as overlaps in service boundaries, while very often, vulnerable families remain outside the welfare net. **Family Services Centres** have become casework-dominated and remedial in nature, relying too much on professional input in a formalized office setting. Individualized casework is expensive but not necessarily the most effective. There is an imminent need for family services centres to adopt a more proactive and diversified approach to reach the hard-to-reach groups, develop stronger networks and ties with other community-based service units in exploring more informal but equally effective approaches and resources to support families.

7. With the existing mode of service delivery, **Family Life Education** programmes are found to be serving *frequent users* rather than those who are less motivated or at risk. With the increasing involvement of the health and education sectors in preventive and developmental work and better inter-departmental and cross-sectoral interfacing, as in the provision of parent education, family life education provided by professional social workers should focus more on vulnerable families. It should be re-positioned to function as an integral part of the overall programme and take on new roles such as training the trainers, rather than functioning as an independent service for its own sake. **Family Activity and Resource Centres**, though strategically located to identify needy families through non-stigmatizing activities, have not demonstrated strong ties with family service centres to serve vulnerable groups.

Restructuring to avoid fragmentation

8. Though all programmes under review have independent policy documents covering their development and provision, the Consultants have observed that services are *fragmented* as they have developed one after another over time. While family problems are becoming more complex, there must be focused efforts in restructuring these services in order to make them accessible, less stigmatized and integrated to help those who need them.

Interfacing among family related services

9. The Consultants pointed out that services and programmes available to assist families are not confined to the eight programmes² under review. Other welfare programmes such as school social work, medical social service, probation service, child protection and child custody services etc. are also providing services to families, though with more specific focus. Similarly, children, youth, community building and elderly services are becoming more family-oriented. Family problems in Hong Kong are getting more complex and more families are now at risk. In meeting these challenges, while family services must continue to progress along a more proactive and cost-effective service direction and delivery system, family welfare services alone cannot solve all social problems. There must be better interfacing among all family related services in order to meet changing family needs.

Need for an improved planning mechanism

10. In the past, planning of most services was based on population ratios. The Consultants have endorsed the move adopted by the Social Welfare Department to district based planning based on objective indicators of community needs, such as

² The eight programmes include Family Services Centres, Family Life Education, Senior Social Work Practitioners, Family Activity and Resource Centres, Family Aide Service, Family Care Demonstration and Resource Centre Cum Carers' Support Centre, Family Education, the newly set up support services for the family under the Service-Oriented Strategy to promote self-reliance : Post-migration Centres and Single Parent Centres.

areas with a high concentration of low-income families, CSSA recipients, lowly educated population, aging population, high rates of unemployment, family violence, youth crime rate, and poor housing conditions. While resources should be redeployed to districts with more special social needs where necessary, flexibility should be exercised to refocus and prioritize service delivery by service providers in a particular district so that family needs are promptly and effectively addressed.

Need for an information management system and enhanced information technology

11. The Consultants have considered that their review work has been hindered by incomplete service and user profile statistics, reflecting an inadequate client information system and the under-development of information technology in the welfare sector. The Consultants have recommended that the need for an enhanced and effective information management system is becoming more prominent in facilitating case management and planning of services.

Need for a valid assessment system and outcome measures

12. Throughout the course of the Review, the social work field has recognized the urgent need to develop a valid and reliable assessment system to identify needs, risks and strengths of service users, leading to the formulation of effective and appropriate treatment and intervention plans. The Consultants have found that the use of assessment tools has so far been piecemeal and segmented. Another major difficulty is the lack of precise and objective criteria to determine good practices, compare performance and assess effectiveness. The Consultants pointed out that according to international experience, the search for unambiguous, reliable and achievable measures of service outcome remains controversial. In particular, the objectives of family welfare services are complicated and multi-dimensional, and it is hard to isolate the impact of the service intervention from the impact of other determinants of social problems. However, the development of

assessment tools and outcome measures, though requiring a long process of preparation and consultation, should be taken forward as they are crucial elements in effective and cost-effective service delivery.

Long-term strategy and service direction

13. The Consultants consider that the broad objectives of family and child welfare services, as set out in the 1991 White Paper on Social Welfare, are still valid and relevant to guide the development of family welfare services in Hong Kong today. However, there is a need to further elaborate on them in the face of rapid changing needs. They have re-affirmed the importance of family service programmes in strengthening families, and in re-affirming the need to adopt the direction of “Child-centred, Family-focused and Community-based” as a way forward for the future development of services, both at central and district levels.

THE ADMINISTRATION’S RESPONSE

14. The Social Welfare Department fully appreciates the efforts of the Consultants in conducting the Review, which has adopted an evidence-based and utilization-focused approach. The Department has set up a Steering Committee, chaired by a Deputy Director, to work closely with the study team. Besides an extensive document and literature review, both local and overseas, the Consultants have conducted 35 focus groups meetings, involving over 360 persons from a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including service providers and users, professional groups, private corporations, groups of parents, women, and the labour sector. The Consultants have also carried out 18 in-depth case studies. In addition, the Consultants have jointly organised with the Department five briefing/sharing sessions, each involving 200-250 persons, in the course of the 9-month study to keep stakeholders informed of the findings and progress of the Review. These meetings have also been used to stimulate discussion and to solicit stakeholders’ views, and to involve them in formulating and refining solutions and recommendations. The

Review has therefore been a highly participatory, transparent and open process. The Department has accepted all of the 27 recommendations put forward by the Consultants. Our response on the major recommendations is highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Long-term strategy and service direction

15. It remains the Government's policy objective to preserve and strengthen families, enhance family functioning and restore families at risk of disruption. We are in full support of the recommended direction in strengthening families through a **child-centred, family-focused and community-based** approach, with emphasis laid on establishing effective partnerships and interface with family-related services in creating a family-friendly environment in service delivery. In formulating the new service delivery model, the principles of "accessibility", "early identification", "integration" and "partnership" as recommended by the Consultants will be adopted to achieve the objectives.

Prioritization of family needs and levels of intervention

16. As family problems are becoming more complex, some families have the resources to meet challenges, but others may be less equipped, with little resilience or strength to cope with changes. We agree with the Consultants that different levels of intervention, according to the level of needs, with the provision of a continuum of preventive, empowering, supportive, and remedial services are needed to address changing problems in a holistic and cost-effective manner. We also agree with the priorities recommended that services should remain focused on families in crisis involving risk of human life, violence, abuse, significant psychological and physical harm, especially when children are involved. Under the principle of early identification and intervention, service priority should also be given to families with various risk factors or poor social links. Early support to these families, especially the hard-to-reach ones, will prevent their problems from

deteriorating into crisis or tragedies.

Areas for improvement in service programmes, needs assessment and outcome measures

17. The recommendations for improvement identified by the Consultants on individual service programmes, and the need for enhanced interfacing under the new service delivery model of an **Integrated Family Service Centre** (with three levels of intervention, namely the **Family Resource Unit, Family Support Unit and Family Counselling Unit**), to form a continuum of service to meet varying family needs, are considered practicable for implementation. We also agree that priority in working out a needs assessment system and outcome measures is necessary to complement the proposed changes.

An improved planning mechanism and restructuring

18. As recommended by the Consultants, we will continue to explore opportunities to restructure services with the aim of avoiding fragmentation and striving for better integration and interfacing among service units in the community to produce synergy. In doing so, we will take into account, the resources and community network already in place, the comparative advantages of respective service units and changing community needs. With the enhanced district planning mechanism in place upon re-organization of the Social Welfare Department in September 2001, District Social Welfare Offices will take up the responsibility to co-ordinate and collaborate with service operators to identify service gaps, facilitate interfacing and partnership, and promote maximum use of resources to meet the specific needs of districts.

19. The Lump Sum Grant subvention system has established a necessary environment for these changes to take place. We agree that service providers should become more customer-focused and outcome-driven, and make use of the flexibility allowed under the Lump Sum Grant mode to re-engineer their services, within the

framework of an enhanced planning mechanism.

Information management system and information technology

20. We are aware of the importance for the Welfare Sector to catch up in the use of information technology (IT) in order to enhance efficiency and responsiveness in the delivery of services, and to acquire up-to-date and accurate information to monitor, review and plan services. SWD has formulated a plan in setting up a Client Information System (CIS) which aims at improving case management and generating useful management information for service planning and monitoring purposes. On a wider front, a Joint Committee on IT for the Welfare Sector, comprising representatives from Health and Welfare Bureau, Information Technology Services Department, SWD, NGOs and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS), has been formed to map out strategies on the use of IT in the Welfare Sector.

Implementation Strategy

21. As the introduction of the new service delivery model, (i.e. the integrated Family Service Centre), rests on a paradigm shift and change of expectations from the Welfare Sector, users and the community at large, we agree with the Consultants that a top-down radical overhaul of all existing service units concurrently is **not** advisable. Instead, a bottom-up and gradual approach should be adopted. The Consultants have recommended six modes to move towards the new service model of an Integrated Family Service Centre. We agree that verifying the effectiveness of the new model through a 2-year Pilot Project, to be carried out in selected districts with an in-built evaluative study, is a pragmatic move.

22. To facilitate this, we will set up a Working Group on Implementation of the Review of Family Services, comprising representatives from SWD, NGOs, HKCSS, service users and independent members of the community by September

2001. At the same time, we will task SWD's DSWOs to devise viable local service re-engineering projects, through consultation with relevant NGOs. The Working Group will monitor the pilot projects whilst other recommendations from Consultants such as those on management information, use of IT and development of performance measurements may be better pursued in other less service-specific fora. We will commission a tertiary institute to conduct the evaluation study. Both the pilot projects and the evaluation study are expected to start in April 2002.

Resource Implications

23. Although the Consultants have observed that the current Family Services Centres are over-stretched and over-loaded, they are conscious of the fact that the public sector must strive for greater cost-effectiveness in its service delivery. These recommendations have therefore been put forward with the aim of achieving greater cost-effectiveness in existing services. The Consultants have concluded that given the substantial public resources already spent on meeting the various needs of the family³, there is ample opportunity to rationalize and maximize the use of existing resources and there is no immediate need for additional resources. However, to provide incentives for change, the Department will consider providing support for capital expenses such as renovation works and the provision of facilities needed by existing service units to meet their new roles. The Lotteries Fund could be used for this purpose.

24. The Consultants have observed that there is now a general acceptance of the changes proposed by the Review and a greater readiness to change inside the Sector. This is in no small part due to the extensive consultations which the Consultants have undertaken, as part of the Review process. However, we acknowledge the need to enhance the competencies of the management and frontline staff and to equip them to take forward the changes, both in terms of knowledge and

³ The estimated expenditure for Family Services Centre and Family Life Education in 2001-02 is \$449M and \$70M respectively, out of a total Estimate of \$1,747M for the whole Family and Child Welfare Programme.

skills. Accordingly, we will identify new or existing resources to conducting training programmes to improve our humanware in areas such as change management, knowledge and skills at various levels of intervention, diversified approaches such as use of groups, volunteer development, community needs assessment, outreach and networking, and strengthened counselling and intervention skills.

ADVICE SOUGHT

25. The Review has accomplished the goal of identifying the way forward to deliver a higher standard of service that is efficient, cost-effective and meets the changing needs of families. Family welfare services are the most prominent area of welfare services, delivered jointly by SWD and NGOs. The Administration will take forward the recommendations in close partnership with NGOs. Members are invited to comment on the recommendations of the Review and the proposed implementation strategy.

*Health and Welfare Bureau/
Social Welfare Department
July 2001*

Consultancy Study on the Review of Family Services

Executive Summary

1. The problems and needs of families in Hong Kong are becoming more complex. Traditional family structures and functions are rapidly eroding. Moreover, family problems are further exacerbated by a growing number of socio-economic issues including rising divorce rates and extra-marital affairs, continuous family-reunion migration from Mainland China, emotional and financial cost of caring for the elderly and the changing economy which has pushed more families into hardship. In effect, more and more families are becoming vulnerable to risk.

2. The eight family service programmes under review are varied in mode, operation and provision, often overlapping in service boundaries with other family-oriented programmes. In many instances, family service centres are stretched far beyond their capacity. As a consequence, they become too reactive, remedial and casework dominated.

3. In meeting these unprecedented challenges, family service programmes have to protect vulnerable families and strengthen family capacities to promote maximum independence. Looking into the future, the direction of family services is summarized as: “Strengthening Families: Child-centred, Family-focused and Community-based.” Accordingly, family services should take the family as a unit of intervention, give special attention to the needs of children, and maximize support from the community. This report emphasizes the formulation of a future service model. It will provide policy-makers, administrators and practitioners with a common vision and a coherent strategy to re-structure the family services system in Hong Kong. The ideal model will ensure that families in need are identified and offered appropriate and effective support.

4. Throughout this Review, a major concern expressed by various stakeholders was the need to have a responsive, flexible, sensitive, and effective family service, with respect for the culture and life style of users. Of particular concern was the ability to extend access to those hard-to-reach families who because of various factors were unable to use family services despite the severity of the situation. As a result, family problems sometimes deteriorate into very difficult situations with no means of recourse creating a huge burden on society.

5. The proposed model aims at attaining the principles of promoting accessibility to users with minimum physical, psychological and administrative barriers; early identification of needs and intervention before the further deterioration of problems; integration of services cutting across programme boundaries, and partnership between service providers to achieve efficient and effective use of scarce resources. Under the new model, multi-skilled teams can respond more proactively to a wide range of social needs,

rather than addressing needs in isolation.

6. The model consists of three components, namely the resource unit, the support unit and the counselling unit. It can provide a continuum of preventive, support, empowerment, advocacy and remedial services to families in need. An integrated service of counselling, referral for tangible service, support and developmental groups, family life education and volunteer development, etc. will be provided. This integrated centre will be able to address problems encountered by families who may require different levels of intervention and professional input.

7. The model will further strengthen the existing clinical intervention of FSCs, and at the same time develop and extend its preventive and developmental functions. Through strengthened ties with the community and the provision of open access services, family services will become more accessible to hard-to-reach families. The development of formal strategic alliances between key partners will eliminate service gaps and maximize the use of scarce resources. The model will also be more cost-effective as reliance on individual casework is reduced.

8. In considering the existing complexity of family services provisions, there should be a number of operating modes for family service providers to move towards the model. In so doing, different family service providers can have a different defined role to play in the re-structuring process. Against this background, a number of pilot projects with different modes of operation should be identified for experimentation.

9. A Working Group on Implementation of Family Services Review should be established, comprising the SWD, NGO and community representatives, to oversee the implementation on the recommendations of the Consultancy Study. In relation to the pilot projects, the Working Group will plan, select, monitor and evaluate the projects. An in-built and independent evaluation should be designed and commissioned at the same time so that the effectiveness of the projects can be demonstrated.

10. The improvement and development of family service programmes will rely on the leadership and initiatives of the government, as well as the support from NGO service providers, at both the central and district levels. At the central level, the Government has to strengthen its role in defining overall service objectives and priorities as well as formulating long-term programme plans. To assume this role, the Government must strengthen its research initiatives and information systems, and to plan and collaborate with other government departments and bureaus, as well as other stakeholders. At the district level, the District Social Welfare Officers, through the district family and child care coordination committees, must identify community needs, formulate strategies, and mobilize and coordinate community resources to address these needs.

11. With the expected re-positioning of the SWD to strengthen the role of District Social Welfare Officers in planning and delivering of welfare services, future service planning no longer rely on changes in caseloads or population size, but on

recommendations from the DSWOs, based on demonstrated community needs and service gaps.

12. Admittedly, the reform of family service programmes will take place in the midst of a series of welfare reforms. In a way, the viability of the proposed new model of family service centers is largely dependent on the success of these other reforms, such as the Lump Sum Grant Subvention, the Service Performance Monitoring System, the planning mechanism, the information technology system, new provision based on competitive bidding, and the repositioning of the SWD. Changes in family services cannot be seen in isolation from other major reforms in administration and in services for youth and the elderly.

13. In conclusion, given the current state of affairs within family services, a radical overhaul of the programmes is not advisable. The introduction of new modes of practice implicates a change in the work paradigm and expectations of the professionals involved. Changing a culture and established practices is not something that can be done overnight. Effective change requires extensive participation and consultation. More importantly, the support from stakeholders and the acceptance of the need for change in the whole re-structuring process is crucial for successful reformation. The development of an effective planning mechanism is pivotal to the implementation, monitoring, evaluation and institutionalization of the changes recommended in this Review.

14. Under the direction of “Strengthening Families: Child-centred, Family-focused, and Community-based”, family services should be accessible to families in need, have the ability to identify problems early and intervene accordingly, integrate services together, and develop partnerships with key service providers. In addressing the objectives of this Review, the Consultant Team makes the following recommendations towards the implementation of the proposed model, together with other suggestions for specific programme improvements.

Recommendation 1

The Consultant Team recommends that family service programmes remain focused on providing remedial and protective services to families in crisis, involving the risk of human life, domestic violence and child abuse.

Recommendation 2

The Consultant Team recommends that family service programmes be more focused to early identification and early intervention, targeting those at-risk families involving various risk factors.

Recommendation 3

The Consultant Team recommends that family service programmes, in partnership with other family-oriented programmes, develop specialized and cost-effective service for families at risk, and/or in crisis.

Recommendation 4

The Consultant Team recommends that FSCs adopt a more proactive approach, diversify its helping strategy, initiate preventive and early identification approaches,

and develop strategic alliances with key partners.

Recommendation 5

With the support of an effective user and service information system, collaboration between FSCs and other family-oriented welfare programmes, namely MSS, SSW service, probation service, and specialized units will be more efficient. A case manager in charge of the planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of the cases is recommended.

Recommendation 6

The Consultant Team recommends that FLE should become an integral part of the programme team of FSC, IT, C&YC, or FARC. FLE programmes should be closely integrated with other approaches, such as brief counselling, guidance and support groups. More attention should be directed towards the needs of vulnerable families. FLE programmes and activities should be provided in all family-oriented programmes whether or not they have FLE provisions.

Recommendation 7

The Consultant Team recommends that FLERC be expanded to develop more centralized evidence-based programme packages for the use of all front-line social workers and other professionals. FLERC should continue to coordinate territory-wide thematic FLE publicity.

Recommendation 8

The Consultant Team recommends that alternative modes of delivering the function of SSWP be explored in the face of the changing functions of the FSC.

Recommendation 9

The Consultant Team recommends that the family aide service be an integral part of a FSC. In supporting family service programmes, targeting at-risk families, the responsibility of FA can be extended beyond in-home training to include group training in practical skills on parenting and home management.

Recommendation 10

The Consultant Team recommends that the function of FARC in providing family support needs to be further strengthened. Its partnership with FSC should be formalized and institutionalized. More NGO community centres should be encouraged to establish FARCs.

Recommendation 11

The Consultant Team recommends the termination of the FCDRC while the centre should focus on its caregiver support function.

Recommendation 12

The Consultant Team recommends that all FSCs, should specifically target vulnerable families. There is no need for Family Education to stand alone as a specialized project. In the future, resources for FE should be absorbed into the re-structured FSCs. PMC and SPC, however, need to be reviewed at the end of the contract to see whether they should be integrated into the IFSC or to operate as specialized units.

Recommendation 13

The Consultant Team recommends six modes for FSCs and other family-related welfare programmes to formulate their own service development strategy in line with district needs and plans to evolve towards the ideal model.

Recommendation 14

The Consultant Team recommends that the effectiveness of the ideal model of an integrated family service centre should be verified through pilot projects.

Recommendation 15

The Consultant Team recommends the establishment of the Working Group on Implementation of Family Services Review to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the Consultancy Study which includes the steering of the pilot projects.

Recommendation 16

The Consultant Team recommends that through coordination and consultation between family service providers by DSWO at the district level, the SWD and NGO service units could initiate to form IFSCs. The proposed projects should be put forward by DSWO to the Working Group on Implementation of the Family Services Review for review and selection. The pilot projects should be located in areas of high social need.

Recommendation 17

The Consultant Team recommends the SWD commission a research team to evaluate the effectiveness of the integrated FSC through pilot projects.

Recommendation 18

The Consultant Team recommends that in the future, service planning should be based on objective indicators of community needs.

Recommendation 19

The Consultant Team recommends that a task group on assessment and its operationalization, through the pilot project be established, comprising representatives from the SWD, NGOs and academics to follow up the work on the development of the assessment system and relevant tools.

Recommendation 20

The Consultant Team recommends that a task group on outcome measures be established, comprising representatives from SWD, NGOs and academics to work on the outcome indicators, with special reference to FSA in pilot projects.

Recommendation 21

The Consultant Team recommends that a standardized user satisfaction survey system be implemented in all FSCs, and a centralized mechanism be installed to compile and review the data regularly.

Recommendation 22

The Consultant Team recommends that the direction of family services is

"Strengthening Families: Child-centred, Family-focused and Community-based."

Recommendation 23

The Consultant Team recommends that the Government strengthen its leadership and planning mechanisms at both the central and district levels.

Recommendation 24

The Consultant Team recommends the implementation schedules as described in Chapter Seven.

Recommendation 25

The Consultant Team recommends that the Government develop a user and service information system, facilitating programme improvements, the development of service partnerships and case management, as well as learning at the district and central levels.

Recommendation 26

The Consultant Team notes the need for a more vigorous and centralized marketing strategies on family services, providing sound and publicly accessible information to citizen and service users about their options and rights.

Recommendation 27

The Consultant Team recommends that training needs for the new modes of family service delivery should be identified and training support be provided. Opportunities for sharing of good practices should be promoted.

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