

LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES

Interim Report on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services

PURPOSE

This paper informs Members of the progress of consultations with the sector on matters arising from the Interim Report on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services which was discussed in the last meeting held on 7 July 2003.

BACKGROUND

2. In the last meeting held on 7 July 2003, we presented to Members the findings and recommendations of the Interim Report on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services and the Department's response to the initial findings and recommendations made by the Consultants, and sought Members' advice on the plan to re-engineer existing family services centres (FSC)/counselling units into Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSC). Members may recall that before the last meeting, position papers were received from the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS), Hong Kong Social Workers' Association (HKSWA) and a group of un-identified workers, expressing their views on the Interim Report and the Department's proposed re-engineering plan and their deputations also attended and spoke at the

meeting. Though the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services made no conclusion as to whether the Department should hold the re-engineering process in abeyance, it also agreed that further consultation and discussion with the welfare sector would be desirable before a decision on implementation was made.

3. On the other hand, we also informed Members that during our consultation with the Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) on 26 June, 2003, SWAC was in support of the direction of IFSC and agreed that we should expedite bringing in service improvements. SWAC also advised that given the concerns of the sector on communication and staff morale (including fear of redundancy by pooling of resources), further consultation with the sector would be desirable to bring all into concerted action to ensure a smooth re-engineering process and the Working Group on the implementation of the Review of Family Services (Working Group) would be a suitable forum to further deliberate the areas of concerns before bringing the issue back to SWAC. Since the Department was operating two-thirds of existing FSCs and fully committed to implementing the IFSC model, SWAC also supported the Department in making early preparation to transform some of its FSCs into IFSCs, particularly those with practical needs such as requiring imminent removal while suitable premises had been identified.

MEETINGS WITH A GROUP OF UN-IDENTIFIED WORKERS, HKSWA AND HKCSS

4. The Department met the group of un-identified workers, HKSWA and HKCSS (represented by 12 NGOs operating family services centres (FSCs)/counselling units) respectively on 15.8.2003, 20.8.2003 and 22.8.2003 to clarify the Department's proposed direction ahead and to exchange views. The major views of these organizations on the re-engineering plan are summarized in the following table:

Views on Re-engineering	Un-identified Workers	HKSWA	HKCSS (including NGOs operating FSCs /counselling units)
Time schedule to implement IFSCs	Should wait till completion of the evaluative study by May 2004.	Should adhere to the original 2-year schedule of the evaluative study, but agreed that preparation work could start now.	Preparation should start now with target implementation date to be tentatively scheduled on 1.4.2004 if possible for some agencies.
Formation of IFSCs limited to agencies with FSCs/ counselling units	Disagreed. Should include other agencies, e.g. those with family service resources such as FLE.	Disagreed. Other agencies might have the interest or ability to provide IFSC service.	Agreed.
Mode of transformation	Strategic alliance should be an option. Partial integration should be accepted.	Strategic alliance should be an option. Partial integration should be accepted.	HKCSS preferred strategic alliance to be an option. But NGOs would not consider this as their option. Would like partial integration to be considered.
Pooling of resources	Supported pooling of resources from family services only. Did not support pooling of resources from community centres and NLCDP because these service programmes had not undergone service review.	Not appropriate to pool resources from community centres without policy review and consultation from relevant stakeholders.	No concerted view on pooling of resources beyond family services. Should adopt a bottom-up approach and up to individual NGO to propose whether or not to pool such resources. So far only two agencies had indicated that they would pool some of their community centre

Views on Re-engineering	Un-identified Workers	HKSWA	HKCSS (including NGOs operating FSCs /counselling units)
			resources to facilitate formation of IFSC in their preferred way.
Consultation	Should consult users, district councils, local organizations on IFSC re-engineering.	Should consult the sector with regard to the formulation of a blueprint of IFSCs.	Should involve the NGOs operating FSCs/counselling units in the formulation of a blueprint of IFSCs.
Efficiency savings	Should deal with efficiency savings separately from the re-engineering.	Should deal with efficiency savings separately from the re-engineering.	Should deal with efficiency savings separately from the re-engineering.
Specialization	-	Had stressed the importance of the continued need for specialized services.	Two agencies preferred allowing flexibility to continue providing specialized services in IFSCs.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REVIEW OF FAMILY SERVICES ON RE-ENGINEERING

5. The above views of these organizations were brought to the Working Group at its meeting held on 29 September 2003 for further deliberation. Members of the Working Group (including representatives of HKCSS and NGOs, though the SWAC representative and the independent member were absent from this meeting), after a deliberation on various areas of concerns, made the following recommendations on how to take the re-engineering exercise forward:

Time Schedule

6. Members of the Working Group noted that the Department had no intention to move into full implementation immediately. However, as endorsed by SWAC, and for practical reason, SWD would transform some of its FSCs into IFSCs. Also, advance planning for an IFSC of one NGO (ISS's Tin Shui Wai IFSC) would proceed. Although the group of unidentified workers viewed that implementation of IFSC should wait till full completion of the evaluative study, Members of the Working Group were of the opinion that preparation for re-engineering should start now and a tentative implementation date, say, April 2004 should be set. Some agencies/centres might be ready for transformation by this date while others might defer a while based on their practical and operational considerations. At least we should aim at working out a blue print for the entire re-engineering exercise by this date. This option was preferred by all agencies operating FSCs/counselling units.

Agencies to be included in the re-engineering

7. Regarding the diverse views on which agencies were to be included, Members of the Working Group noted that there was a view that agencies not operating FSCs/counselling units should also be included in providing IFSC services. However, as in the re-engineering of elderly and youth services, the question of admitting service units outside of that programme area to transform into the integrated mode, such as FSCs turning into ICYSCs, had not arisen. Moreover, with 66 FSCs/IFSCs in existence, there was saturation in the number of IFSCs, hence little room for participation by agencies other than those which were currently operating FSCs/counselling units. Besides, since this was a Review of Family Services, Members of the Working Group considered it logical to give priority to agencies operating FSCs/counselling units to be transformed into IFSCs. Thus, for both equity and practical considerations, and in order not to make resources of the agencies

operating FSCs/counselling units redundant in the process of re-engineering, the Working Group recommended to maintain the original proposal to restrict the re-engineering to agencies operating FSCs/counselling units. The list of agencies operating FSCs/counselling units with details of their existing resources is at the Annex.

Mode of Transformation

8. Members of the Working Group noted that in the Interim Report, the Consultants were of the view that pilot projects of strategic alliance, owing to the fundamental differences between the culture and practices between the two partnered agencies, had taken a long time for their agencies to reduce differences and observed that redeployment of staff and shared budgeting had been difficult. Though the general response from the sector was that it was too early to disregard strategic alliance as an option for transformation, there was however, no agency operating FSCs/counselling units ready to choose this mode in the transformation process. As such, if strategic alliance was opened as an option, it might in turn frustrate those potential strategic partners if later on they realized that this was not a preferred option of the operators. Therefore, the Working Group came to the conclusion to stick to the original recommendation, i.e. strategic alliance was not preferred. However, there was an understanding that the re-engineered IFSCs should continue to work in close partnership and collaboration with relevant agencies (including their strategic allies during the pilot period) to best meet the needs of the district.

9. From the experience of the pilot projects, the consultant team had recommended complete merging and not partial integration of family and community-based services to avoid co-existence of two service units with similar and overlapping functions and services, particularly if they were operated by the same agency and located in the same premises, so as not to create confusion to users, staff members and community partners. On this

issue, the Working Group had deliberated whether or not partial integration should be allowed. Members of the Working Group recommended that partial integration would be allowed but only for community centres (given its strength of manpower) on a case-by-case basis and with strong justifications to be provided by the NGO concerned. Should partial pooling be considered, the operating agency had to ensure that there would not be overlapping in the functions and services of the remaining community centre and those of the transformed IFSC. SWD has made it known that since NGO community centres are subvented under the Community Building Programme contributing to Secretary for Home Affairs' policy area, such proposed pooling of community centre resources could not be taken for granted.

Pooling of Resources

10. Based on the recommendation by the consultant team, an IFSC should have a minimum staff provision of at least 12-14 social workers and a supervisor. Members of the Working Group noted that among the 12 NGOs operating FSCs/counselling units as listed in the Annex, Neighbourhood Advisory – Action Council and Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council were each operating an integrated services project, and hence have no further need for transformation into IFSCs, two NGOs, i.e. Caritas-Hong Kong and Hong Kong Family Welfare Society would have sufficient FSCs/counselling units resources to form IFSCs, while the remaining seven NGOs (excluding Against Child Abuse which was having too few family service resources and warranted further discussion on refocusing of their work on a separate forum) might require some pooling of resources to facilitate them to transform their FSCs/counseling units into IFSCs.

11. On pooling of resources, there was no dispute in pooling of family service resources (such as Family Life Education units, Family Support and Resource Centres and recurrent resources from Post-migration Centres).

But pooling of resources beyond family service resources (such as those from Family Support and Networking Teams, Children and Youth Centres, Community Centres (CC) and Neighbourhood Level Community Development Projects (NLCDP)) was a major concern of the sector. Members of the Working Group deliberated various options such as limiting NGOs operating FSCs/counselling units to pool family service resources only, and allowing NGOs operating FSCs/counselling units to pool resources beyond family services only if they did not have sufficient family service resources to form IFSCs. To conclude, Members of the Working Group preferred a bottom-up approach which had worked well all along since the Review of Family Services. They felt that the Department should maintain an open mind in considering NGOs' proposal of pooling resources, and flexibility should also be given to pooling of resources beyond family services on individual request. Yet, if pooling of resources beyond family service resources was proposed, the concerned NGOs should provide strong justifications, conduct thorough staff consultation and solicit adequate buy-in of stakeholders before making their proposals. The Department would also have to obtain policy clearance with Home Affairs Bureau on proposals of pooling resources of such community service resources where appropriate.

Other Concerns

12. The Department had clarified and assured that the issue of efficiency savings would be considered separately from this exercise. SWD had also agreed that IFSCs might maintain some sort of specialties on a cluster basis based on district need, and was ready to consult relevant stakeholders as appropriate in the process, the Working Group saw no big controversy over these issues.

SECOND ROUND OF MEETINGS WITH A GROUP OF UN-IDENTIFIED WORKERS, HKSWA AND HKCSS AFTER THE WORKING GROUP

13. The Department held a second round of meetings with the group of un-identified workers, HKSWA and HKCSS (represented by 12 NGOs operating FSCs/counselling units) respectively on 7.10.2003, 8.10.2003 and 16.10.2003 to convey the views of the Working Group on the various areas of concerns and to facilitate mutual understanding. While appreciating the Department's effort to keep them informed of the updated position, the group of un-identified workers still expressed concern over the pooling of resources beyond family services. They submitted position paper to SWAC again in its meeting of 28 October 2003, objecting the pooling of community development service resources if the agency concerned had adequate family service resources, but agreeing that agencies without adequate family service resources might pool community development service resources if meeting certain criteria including adequate consultation with and support by staff and other stakeholders concerned. HKSWA, on the other hand, still had reservations on the recommendations that only agencies operating FSCs/counselling units would be included in the re-engineering, strategic alliance not being considered as a preferred mode of transformation, and permission of pooling of resources beyond family services on a case-by-case basis etc. On the other hand, HKCSS, represented by all NGOs operating FSCs/counselling units, expressed their support to all the recommendations of the Working Group. These NGOs further expressed the view that as the main stakeholders of family service, their views should be given due weight in the re-engineering of family services in Hong Kong. They also emphasized that further delay of the re-engineering process arising from diverse views of the sector, mainly from other non-family service providers and staff, would undermine the morale of family service workers who had expressed readiness for the re-engineering to provide better support to families in Hong Kong.

THE DEPARTMENT'S VIEWS

14. The reform of family service programmes should not be seen in isolation from the series of welfare reforms that has taken place in recent years and the demanding environment to cope with rising social and family problems. Indeed, the Department and the welfare sector have probably spent the longest time to thoroughly review, pilot and evaluate the family service programmes to the extent that this is the area that is lagging behind other programmes in service integration and re-engineering. Take for instance, the formation of Integrated Children & Youth Service Centres has been significantly expedited since 2001 with the number of ICYSCs rising from 64 to 131 over the period; the whole range of community elderly services has been re-engineered into a network of District Elderly Community Centres and Neighbourhood Elderly Centres and Integrated Home Care Services Teams since April 2003 and advance preparatory work is under way for transforming sheltered workshop and supported employment into Integrated Vocational Rehabilitation Centres for people with disabilities. With rising family problems, we really do not wish to see the needed service re-engineering being unnecessarily delayed.

15. We have made it known that family services are SWD's core business. In fact, with 42 FSCs/IFSCs operated by SWD, this is the only direct service that we would need to preserve and strengthen to discharge the important government role of supporting families in need and in crisis, such as during the SARS outbreak. The Department is ready to transform and preparation is well under way in terms of the physical infrastructure (reprovisioning or relocation of the FSCs to suit the new functions of IFSC as justified) and information technology (the development of a Client Information System). Thus, regardless of the outcome of discussions with the NGO sector, we do not feel that the Department's re-engineering efforts and work should be aborted.

16. On the advice of SWAC and LegCo Welfare Panel, the Department has consulted those parties that have expressed views on the matter quite intensively over the last few months. We are now in complete consensus with the NGO family service providers as represented by the HKCSS. As expressed by these NGO providers, they are the key stakeholders in the provision of effective and efficient family services. We agree that their views should be given due weight in considering the way forward.

CONSULTATION WITH SWAC ON 28 OCTOBER 2003

17. We presented to SWAC the outcomes of our consultations with various organizations during the past few months, the recommendations of the Working Group, as well as the Department's views on this re-engineering exercise as outlined in the paragraphs above at its meeting held on 28 October 2003. Appreciating the Department's efforts in consulting concerned organizations and achieving consensus with the NGO family service providers, SWAC was of the view that for the interest of the service users and for more effective and efficient use of resources, service integration should be the right direction. It followed that preparation for transformation should start now and should not wait till full completion of the study. SWAC endorsed all the proposals of the Working Group which members found practical. Regarding the concerns of the frontline staff, SWAC advised that the NGO boards / management committees should take the management responsibility to get buy-in of their staff and other stakeholders concerned before they put up their re-engineering proposals. The Department was also advised to conduct more sharing sessions, training seminars, etc. to help the sector get more familiar with the IFSC model and approach and to facilitate change of mindset, so as to better prepare the sector for the changes that will be brought about by this re-engineering exercise.

ADVICE SOUGHT

18. Members are requested to note the outcome of the consultations with the relevant stakeholders and comment on the way forward.

Social Welfare Department
November 2003

