

LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES

A REPORT OF THE STUDY TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL WELFARE DEPARTMENT'S ENHANCED DISTRICT SOCIAL WELFARE OFFICE FUNCTIONS

PURPOSE

This paper informs Members of the findings and recommendations of the Report of Part One of the “Study to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Social Welfare Department (SWD)’s Enhanced District Social Welfare Office Functions” (“the Study”) and the Department’s responses to the recommendations; and invites Members’ comments and advice on the plans to further improve and consolidate the enhanced functions of the District Social Welfare Offices.

THE CONSULTANCY STUDY

2. At the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services meeting held on 8 April 2002 vide paper titled “Enhanced Functions of District Social Welfare Officers”, an initial assessment of the enhanced roles of District Social Welfare Office after the re-organisation ¹ of SWD was reported to Members. Whilst noting generally positive outcome, Members suggested that a more structured and systematic study should be conducted to benchmark the effectiveness of the enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions.

¹ For details of the re-organisation, please see the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services papers “Positioning Social Welfare Department for Greater Challenges” [CB(2)1462/00-01(03)] (14 May 2001) and “Enhanced Functions of District Social Welfare Officers” [CB(2)1491/01-02(05)] (8 April 2002)

3. In February 2003, SWD commissioned the Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong (“the Consultants”) to conduct the ten-month Study, with funding support from the Lotteries Fund. The Study, covering the retrospective one-year period from April 2002 to March 2003 after the Department’s fully-fledged re-organisation, comprises two parts. Part One of the Study evaluates the effectiveness of the enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions covering the following four aspects : -

- (a) planning welfare services on a district basis to meet local community needs;
- (b) collaborating with District Councils (DCs), related Government departments and district organisations to facilitate the implementation of social welfare policies in the district;
- (c) co-ordinating with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the district in respect of delivery of services in meeting the welfare needs of the local community; and
- (d) establishing a more proactive social outreaching network in the district to help the needy and the disadvantaged.

Part Two of the Study aims to identify model practices, or best practices, in the work of District Social Welfare Offices which were proven to be effective in meeting the desired objectives and outcomes of the various welfare initiatives for internal reference. This paper focuses on the findings and recommendations of Part One of the Study.

FINDINGS

4. The objectives of Part One of the Study are to evaluate the effectiveness of the enhanced District Social Welfare Office Functions with a view to identifying room for further improvement and better serving the community, and to set benchmarks for the aspects where enhanced functions have created the greatest impact in terms of customer satisfaction, cost-effectiveness and feedback from stakeholders. Adopting a pluralistic approach, with mixed qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the Consultants collected information from a variety of

sources, including documentary review of relevant reports, analysis of the structure, operations and self-assessment reports of all the District Social Welfare Offices, a self-administered questionnaire survey and focus groups on the views of the key community stakeholders. The Report of Part One of the Study was completed in September 2003, the Executive Summary of which is attached at **Annex** for Members' reference.

5. Overall feedback from key stakeholders both through the questionnaire survey and focus groups on the enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions has been very positive. The re-organised District Social Welfare Offices have been perceived as more effective and responsive than the former SWD district operation structures. They all have built up a strong network of community partnerships for promoting the quality of community life. With wider representation, these cross-sector and cross-service networks are paramount to provide policy feedback, mobilise local resources for concerted and joint actions, and support new welfare initiatives. At issue is how these established networks can be sustained and their institutional capacity empowered. The Consultants consider that the District Social Welfare Officers (DSWOs) should provide the leadership at the district level to engage key stakeholders as partners in developing and achieving the shared vision, and providing the supportive environment for cross-sector and cross-departmental collaborations. Findings on the four main aspects are elaborated in the ensuing paragraphs.

Planning of District Welfare Services

6. After the re-organisation, District Social Welfare Offices are given greater authority, responsibility and influence in welfare service planning. The DSWOs are expected to provide detailed district information and reflect local sentiments to inform SWD headquarters on policy and service planning, through the conduction of community need assessment, and through public consultation in the form of community forums, focus groups, surveys and committee meetings. There are plenty of examples whereby the District Social Welfare Offices have demonstrated effectiveness in identifying and responding to district needs. Nevertheless, to further enhance their effectiveness, there is a need to structure the district planning framework and in particular to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation on outcomes of the plans. Moreover, the participation of community stakeholders should be strengthened through the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes.

Liaison and Collaboration with DC and District Organisations

7. This enhanced function has been rated as the most successful of all. The re-organisation has established a wider community network of professional expertise and interest representation. Through sincere invitation and active collaborations, more DC members and personalities of district organisations have been connected and included into the district planning mechanism. The District Social Welfare Office system becomes a focal point for district organisations and personalities to interact and exchange resources, and to explore collaborations. In addition to the provision of interaction opportunities, DSWOs also provide assistance in terms of vital district information, referrals for funding and resource support, professional expertise, connections to relevant services, access to vulnerable groups and arrangements for joint programmes. This cross-service, cross-sector, cross-departmental, cross-professional participative system centred on the District Social Welfare Office is vital for informed service planning and effective service implementation.

Co-ordination and Promotion of Welfare Services

8. District Social Welfare Offices have also played an important role in identifying service gaps and deploying and/or mobilising local resources to address those needs. From the formation of pilot integrated family service centres and youth services to the re-engineering of community-based elderly services, the role and contribution of the DSWOs have been increasingly reckoned and regarded as exemplars of success. While District Coordinating Committee (DCC) remains the key mechanism for district planning and co-ordination, with a more heterogeneous and pluralist groups from diverse background, it has been increasingly difficult to move beyond informing to discussing district issues in greater depth, not to mention the conflicts of interests among members having different conceptions on welfare services and interpretations on how they should be organised. How to sustain the balanced participation and quality discussion from different sectors is a formidable challenge to the DSWOs.

Community Networking and Outreaching Work

9. Comparing with other enhanced functions of the District Social Welfare Office, community networking and outreaching work is accorded with a lower

recognition. Perhaps, the majority of the stakeholders may not have enough knowledge on the work of Family Support Networking Teams (FSNTs). In response to identified service gaps, community issues and crisis, as well as individual tragedies, Planning and Coordinating Teams (PCTs) and FSNTs have been central in re-deploying resources to reach out to the target groups and address their needs. However, in the light of rapid development of other community-based outreaching services, such as those in family, youth and elderly services, there is a need for better co-ordination and streamlining of the existing outreaching and networking service for disadvantaged target groups in the district to avoid duplication of service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. To consolidate and further improve the performance of the enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions, the Consultants have made the following recommendations:

- (a) the enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Office should be further clarified and explained to key community stakeholders through various means and channels;
- (b) there is a need to establish and consolidate the district planning framework and mechanism for need assessment, formulation of common vision, objectives and community strategy, and establishment of a monitoring and evaluating mechanism;
- (c) the influence and role of district comments and district needs in policy-making should be strengthened and demonstrated to acknowledge the importance of district inputs;
- (d) there is a need to review the DCC mechanism in terms of its role and functions, structure and composition, and consider the setting up of a district-level welfare council with a wider community representation and a cross-service, cross-departmental and cross-sector focus;
- (e) the role of DSWO in District Management Committee, DCs and DC Social Service related Committees can be strengthened to connect

district planning effectively to the District Administration system;

- (f) there is a need for an effective and affordable district information management system to support district planning and cater to the information needs of different community stakeholders;
- (g) facing a more diversified, competing and politicised participation structure, DSWOs have to maintain a transparent, open, impartial, balanced, and fair approach to all the community stakeholders and be equipped with the political skills in managing competing expectations and interests, lobbying support and mediating conflicts; and
- (h) to discharge the increased responsibilities and meet the staggering demands from community stakeholders, District Social Welfare Offices are encouraged to reflect on and refocus its efforts and resources to the core business of SWD and to select strategic partners into the community networks. At the same time, there may be considerations on how to redeploy more manpower support to the work of PCTs in district planning and coordination.

THE WAY FORWARD

11. The re-organisation of District Social Welfare Offices has only been implemented for over a year. They are still in the process of experimenting with their new initiatives and community strategic partnerships, reviewing their experiences and searching for better tactics and outcomes. Therefore, this Study Report has provided timely and objective feedback to help them plan for the way forward. Accepting all the Consultants' recommendations and taking available resources into consideration, the Department has deliberated a number of action plans to further develop the institutional capacity and effectiveness of the District Social Welfare Offices.

Communication with Community Stakeholders

12. Communication with key community stakeholders is to be strengthened through different means and channels such as publication and briefing, with a view to

helping them develop a more comprehensive understanding and adjust their expectations on the functions and roles of District Social Welfare Offices. To demonstrate the appreciation on district inputs in the policy and service planning processes, both SWD headquarters and District Social Welfare Offices will register the stakeholders' views and provide them with due feedback when the issues concerned are concluded.

District Planning and Coordination

13. To provide the Department an objective basis for resource allocation and performance assessment, especially to prepare for the stringent conditions in public finance in the years ahead, the Department would adopt the Consultant's recommendation to establish a standardised district planning framework. As a start, guidelines or checklists on formulation of business plans will be worked out for District Social Welfare Offices to structure and standardise their planning, consultation and evaluation processes. To facilitate central and district planning, we will consider conducting an in-house research on the development of evidence-based indicators/indices for assessing district welfare needs with data available both within and outside the Department, e.g. service statistics and population and household statistics.

14. The Consultants' recommendation to review the DCC mechanism and set up a district level welfare council with wider community representation will also be piloted in one district. As an interim measure, DSWOs would encourage and facilitate cross-service or DCCs collaborations to promote policy and service integration in the districts.

District Information Management System

15. With the forthcoming development of Departmental Intranet and establishment of technical infrastructure, back-end support to districts in accessing, managing and sharing data, information and references relating to district planning will be strengthened. To meet the information needs of community stakeholders, the Departmental homepage will be strengthened to include more district information such as district plans, programme activities and resources.

Staff Training and Development

16. To better prepare our workforce and develop their competence to carry out a wide array of initiatives embodied in the enhanced District Social Welfare Office functions, extra input on staff training and development is necessitated. Inter-district sharing on best practices in addition to the regular training organised for DSWOs and PCT members will be held, when Part two of this Study is completed, to offer them a platform to share their experiences, challenges and learning and to advance their work skills in multi-dimensions.

Review on Manpower Deployment in PCTs

17. As recommended by the Consultants, District Social Welfare Offices will continue to focus their efforts and resources on the core business of SWD and the building of strategic community partnership. To relieve the work pressure of PCTs, DSWOs have been empowered to exercise autonomy and flexibility in deploying staff resources at the district level accordingly.

ADVICE SOUGHT

18. Members are requested to note the recommendations of the Study Report and comment on the actions to take these recommendations forward. With Members' endorsement, the findings and recommendations of the Study will be reported to District Councils and other key community stakeholders to solicit their support before implementation of the action plan.

Social Welfare Department
November 2003

A Study to Evaluate the Effectiveness of SWD's Enhanced District Social Welfare Office Functions

Executive Summary

1. In February 2003, the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong was commissioned by the Social Welfare Department to evaluate the effectiveness of the enhanced functions of the District Social Welfare Offices between April 2002 and March 2003. The enhanced functions included in this study are:

- a) planning welfare services on a district basis to meet local community needs;
- b) collaborating with District Council, related government departments and district organizations to facilitate the implementation of social welfare policies in the district;
- c) coordinating with non-governmental organizations in the district in respect of delivery of services in meeting the welfare needs of the local community; and
- d) establishing a more proactive social outreaching network in the district to help the needy and the disadvantaged.

2. The objectives of this Study are to evaluate the effectiveness of these functions with a view to identifying room for further improvement and better serving the community, and to set benchmarks for the aspects where enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Offices have created the greatest impact, in terms of customer satisfaction, cost-effectiveness and feedback from stakeholders. As a formative evaluation, this Study aims to seek informed continuous learning through feedback from key community stakeholders, to provide future strategic directions and enhance institutional capacity and effectiveness on district planning, service coordination, community partnerships and outreaching services targeting people in need.

3. Based on a pluralistic approach, mixing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this Study collected information from a variety of sources, including documentary review of relevant reports, analysis of the structure, operations and self-assessment reports of all the District Social Welfare Offices, a self-administered questionnaire survey and focus groups on the views of the key community stakeholders. Although the consultants would very much hope that this Report can offer a comprehensive study aimed at improving the enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Offices, we are fully aware that the re-organized District Social Welfare Offices have only been implemented for over one year. Such a thorough evaluation would require more in-depth considerations and further investigations. Indeed, most District Social Welfare Offices are still in the process of consolidating and reassessing their working plans and operations. Most community stakeholders are

only beginning to clarify their expectations and understanding on what are and what are not the duties of District Social Welfare Offices in practice, as well as the division of responsibilities between the district and the headquarters; and how they can strategically relate to the district planning mechanism. As the re-organization represented efforts to strengthen some of the former functions of the District Social Welfare Offices, rather than a radical transformation of the direction and operations, many of the improvements and changes have been gradual, emerging and subtle, rather than dramatic. Having said all these, the consultants believe that this Report can stimulate further reflections and discussion that can contribute to the future development of District Social Welfare Offices.

4. After the re-organization, the role of District Social Welfare Offices in policy and service planning has been recognized. Now SWD headquarters is expected to consult District Social Welfare Offices for their views and opinions on district needs and local sentiments in policy and project planning. District Social Welfare Offices are central in re-engineering welfare services, re-directing the service priority of the headquarters, introducing “unwelcome” services to the neighborhoods, seeking local consultations on welfare policies, identifying community needs and formulating community strategy, coordinating services to bridge service gaps and avoid service overlaps, and providing outreaching services to identify and connect vulnerable populations. From the formation of pilot integrative family services centers and youth services to the re-engineering of community-based elderly services, the role and contribution of DSWOs have been increasingly reckoned and regarded as exemplars of success. In the coming re-engineering of the family services centers, the role of DSWO will be more prominent.

5. The consultants are impressed with the commitment and support of the District Social Welfare Office staff toward the re-organization. Under the leadership of the DSWOs and the “cohesive, dynamic and proactive” team culture of the staff, the District Social Welfare Offices demonstrated pride and ownership to their achievements, capacity to handle complicated job challenges, and willingness to innovate. They recognized their achievements in areas such as establishing and sustaining good relationship with district stakeholders and outward-looking and proactive approach to tackle community issues. District Social Welfare Offices varied significantly on their approach and strategy to execute the enhanced functions. Yet they all have built up a strong network of community partnerships for promoting the quality of community life.

6. Overall feedback from key stakeholders both through the questionnaire survey and focus groups on the enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Office has been very positive. Community stakeholders were relatively more satisfied with the functions of introduction and explanation of the government’s welfare policies, and the provision of updated information on welfare services, the promotion of district liaison and collaborations, and the coordination and promotion of welfare services. Relatively speaking, community network and outreaching work had been accorded with a lower recognition. In comparing with other community stakeholders,

NGO stakeholders were less satisfied on these enhanced functions. They seemed to have higher expectations on the District Social Welfare Offices to provide assistance to them in program planning, re-engineering of services, reflecting their views to the headquarters, and resolving some of the difficulties involved.

7. District Social Welfare Offices would perform community need assessment and consultations through a variety of means, including community forums, surveys, focus groups and community meetings. There were plenty of examples whereby the District Social Welfare Offices had demonstrated their effectiveness in identifying and responding to district needs. Community stakeholders had been particularly impressed by the role of the District Social Welfare Offices in pooling them together to provide assistance to residents under the Comprehensive Redevelopment of Public Housing Estates, ethnic minorities, elderly people living in remote villages and young night drifters.

8. Community stakeholders were impressed by the high-profile and friendly approach of DSWOs. District Social Welfare Offices had been rated by many district organizations as the most helpful government department in the districts. In fact, the policy emphasis of SWD should be a learning example for other government departments. District Social Welfare Offices were recognized as a “match-maker”, connecting organizations together to form partners for district programs and service providers to funding support; “resource-provider” providing vital district information and funds; “advocator” representing the interests of the districts to the headquarters; “trouble-shooter” for all sort of welfare-related problems; and “service provider” following-up enquiries, making case referrals and providing direct services.

9. Now the District Social Welfare Office system has become a focal point for district organizations and personalities to interact and exchange resources, and to explore collaborations. Evidence suggests that the re-organization has widened the community network and partnership of SWD beyond NGOs receiving SWD subvention to DCs and district organizations. District organizations include residents’ organizations, faith organizations, interest groups, service users, and business organizations. District Social Welfare Offices have effectively energized and motivated the interests, as well as improved the understanding and knowledge of more DC members and district organizations on welfare issues. This cross-service, cross-sector, cross-departmental, and cross-professional participative system centered on the District Social Welfare Office is vital for informed service planning and effective service implementation.

10. More importantly, the widened participation strategy has brought in additional community resources, such as funding and volunteers to support welfare programs. The new partnerships with district organizations and business sector have demonstrated that there are untapped resources in the community which can be mobilized for community improvement projects. With widened representation, these cross-sector and cross-service networks are paramount to provide policy feedback, mobilize local resources for concerted and joint actions, and support new welfare

initiatives. At issue is how these established networks can be sustained and their institutional capacity empowered.

11. Coupled with the more open and diversified community participation, the function of District Social Welfare Offices has been extended from service coordination to the mobilization of local resources to address locally identified social issues. Since social welfare services are intricately interwoven with issues related to health, leisure, housing, employment, education, public security, community building and elderly care, it is evident that the DSWOs have become a key player in community issues involving cross-sector and cross-departmental collaborations.

12. Moving from short-term service coordination and adjustments to developing long-term community partnerships, there is a need for the DSWOs to strengthen their leadership which can inspire common vision, enthusiasm and commitment, empower the institutional capacity, and command the trust from other community partners.

Recommendations

- a) The enhanced functions of District Social Welfare Office should be further clarified and explained to key community stakeholders through various means and channels. There should be publications, such as leaflets introducing its structure and functions, including its enhanced functions, in plain language.
- b) There is a need to establish and consolidate the district planning framework and mechanism – need assessment, formulating a common vision, objectives and community strategy, and establishing a monitoring and evaluating mechanism. Without a more standardized approach to assess community needs and district planning, there is no way SWD headquarters can have an objective basis for resource allocation and assess performance. Key stakeholders should be actively involved to increase their sense of ownership. The planning mechanism should be supported with relevant training on planning. In view of the fact that district planning is an emerging operational process, there should be a mechanism for the key staff of District Social Welfare Offices to share their experiences, challenges and learnings on a regular basis.
- c) To acknowledge the importance of district inputs, the influence and role of district comments and district needs in policy-making should be further strengthened and demonstrated.
- d) There is a need to review the DCC mechanism in terms of its role and functions, structure and composition. The setting up of a district-level welfare council may be considered through the setting up of some pilot projects. The district welfare council will have a wider community representation and a cross-service, cross-departmental and cross-sector focus. It can act as a local forum on welfare policy and a platform for promoting joint actions. But the notion of a district welfare council may

overlap with the work of DCSRC. Under the council, there may be service or issue related working groups or sub-committees. In addition, local welfare committee at the level of a sub-district or area can be promoted. As an interim measure, cross-service or DCCs collaborations should be encouraged to be in line with the government's policy to promote policy and service integration and to avoid service fragmentation.

- e) Even though District Social Welfare Offices have successfully connected more DC members to district planning, the role of DSWO in DMC, DC and DCSRC can be further strengthened. It is important that district planning has to be connected effectively to the District Administration system.
- f) To support district planning, there is a need for an effective and affordable district information management system – databank, program activities and resources. The system would cater to the needs of government departments and district organizations, service providers, DCs, service users and residents. There should be a clear analysis on the information needs of different community stakeholders and how to provide the information appropriately.
- g) Facing a more diversified, competing, and politicized participation structure, there is a need for DSWOs to maintain a transparent, open, impartial, balanced, and fair approach to all the community stakeholders. With a more heterogeneous participatory structure, it would inevitably induce tensions and competition among stakeholders. To do so, DSWOs have to be equipped with the political skills in managing competing expectations and interests, lobbying support and mediating conflicts. In welcoming the entry of other community stakeholders into the district planning system, District Social Welfare Offices should reaffirm NGOs as their core partners.
- h) Increased responsibility should be matched with supporting resources. The continuous extension of community networks is both labor and resource intensive. The demands from community stakeholders will be staggering. This Study can encourage District Social Welfare Offices to reflect on and refocus its efforts and resources to the core business of SWD and to select strategic partners into the community networks. At the same time, there may be considerations on how to redeploy more manpower support to the work of PCTs in district planning and coordination.

Consultant Team
Department of Social Work and Social Administration
The University of Hong Kong
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