

LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES

Child Protection

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the principles and practice adopted in delivering welfare services related to the protection of children.

Guiding Principles

2. A “child-centred, family-focused and community-based” approach has been adopted in the planning and delivering of family services in Hong Kong. The basic values adopted with regard to child welfare cases are:

- (a) children are best protected and nurtured within a loving family in which physical care, mutual support and emotional security are available to foster the development of children into healthy and responsible members of society;
- (b) support to help a dysfunctional family to resume normal functioning will be provided so that children can be cared for continuously in a family environment; and
- (c) children will be removed from a family environment only when there is no better alternative.

Needs and Risk assessment

3. When the life of a child is endangered, the child will be removed from a family immediately. In circumstances suggesting that a criminal offence may have been committed, the case will be reported to the Police. The overriding concern is always the safety and welfare of the child. Risk factors considered include manifestation of abusive behaviour, history of abusive

behaviour including frequency / severity of the abusive behaviour and severity of the impact of the abuse on the child. The coping ability of the family will also be duly considered when deciding whether the child has to be removed from his or her family immediately.

4. For situations where immediate removal of a child is not required, the focus of assessment will be on the child's welfare needs and the support required by the carer(s) to resume normal caring function in a family environment. The best interest of a child is always the prime concern. Professional assessment and judgment play an essential part throughout the process having regard to the circumstances of individual cases. Considerations pertinent to the assessment include evaluation of the child's and the carer's physical, mental and psychosocial well-being, understanding of the child's growth and developmental history, child care ability, parent-child relationship, child care arrangement and availability of support in the family network.

Options of Intervention

5. In formulating a welfare plan for a child, the parents/carers are consulted and involved. Depending on the child's age and ability to understand issues at stake, the views and wishes of the child will also be considered. If children can be cared for in their families continuously, the concerned social worker will work closely with the families and other concerned stakeholders. In addition to counselling service, various kinds of services to support the carers in taking care of the children at home will be provided. These services include:

- (a) child care centre services;
- (b) day foster care;
- (c) mutual help child care centre service;
- (d) after school care programme;
- (e) housing assistance;
- (f) financial aid;
- (g) elderly and rehabilitation services;
- (h) clinical psychological services;
- (i) parenting education;
- (j) support groups, and
- (k) volunteer support.

6. If out-of-home care is preferred, a child will be placed under the care of relatives as far as possible. Failing that, foster care or institutional care will be arranged. Normally, children will be considered for foster care service or small group homes, which are similar to a home environment, before placing them in institutions such as children's homes and boys' / girls' homes.

7. Where there is a need for statutory protection for the child, the social worker of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) or the Police Officer may initiate care or protection proceedings for the child under the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance, Cap. 213. The court may appoint the Director of Social Welfare as legal guardian, or commit the child to the care of any person or any institution who is willing to take care of the child, or order the parent / guardian to enter into recognizance to exercise proper care and guardianship, and / or place the child under supervision for a period of not exceeding 3 years.

Working Platform

8. Protection of children is one of the key functions of an extensive network of casework service units, namely, Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs), Integrated Services Centres (ISCs), Family and Child Protective Services Units (FCPSU), medical social service units (MSSUs) and probation offices. Noting that there are needy families who are unwilling to seek help, a Family Support Programme (FSP) will be launched in IFSCs/ISCs, FCPSUs and Psychiatric MSSUs starting from 2006-07. FSP aims to introduce the needy families to various support service available and motivate them to receive appropriate services at an early stage.

9. With an emphasis on early identification and early intervention of problems, a pilot Comprehensive Child Development Service (CCDS) was launched in Sham Shui Po in 2005. It is a community-based programme using the Maternal and Child Health Centres, which at present provide services to over 90% of newborn babies, as the platform to enhance collaboration and interface of different sectors through better alignment of the delivery of health, education and social services to ensure early identification of the varied needs of children and their families so that appropriate services can be made available to them in a timely manner. Children and / or their family members in need of welfare services are referred to IFSCs / ISCs for early intervention on the identified psycho-social problems. The Service has been extended to Tin Shui Wai, Tuen Mun and Tseung Kwan O since January 2006.

10. There are mechanisms at different levels to ensure effective collaboration among the concerned parties in the handling of child protection cases. To formulate an appropriate welfare plan relating to suspected child abuse cases and other cases in need of cross-sector collaboration, multi-disciplinary case conference with input from concerned parties, including social workers, doctors, teachers, police officers, clinical psychologists, carer etc. are convened.

Prevention and Education

11. Prevention is better than cure. SWD has stepped up effort to enhance public awareness on the importance of child protection and family education. A Working Group has been formed in 2002 to map out a comprehensive publicity strategy on domestic violence, including child abuse. In addition to the wide-range of publicity campaigns and efforts made in the past few years, a series of family education, publicity and community involvement programmes will be launched in 2006/07 to promote the values, ethics and individual responsibility needed for family harmony. Concerted effort involving different sectors of the community to build a society free from family violence so that children can grow up in a loving and nurturing environment is essential. For instance, the Education and Manpower Bureau has developed lesson plans related to the prevention of domestic violence for teachers to conduct activities with students of kindergarten, primary and secondary schools.

Monitoring Mechanism

12. To closely monitor the progress and effectiveness of case intervention, ongoing assessment and monitoring for both the child and the family are provided. Throughout the helping process, cases are monitored through a regular bring-up system¹. Besides, all child welfare cases are monitored through regular case conference and reviews in the SWD casework units concerned. Case review meetings are also held at the residential unit to strengthen cooperation among the family, the referring social worker, and the residential unit in implementing the care plan for the child. Furthermore, close liaison and collaboration with related parties and mobilization of relevant collaboration and communication systems to formulate and implement the long-term goals are maintained. When relevant new information becomes available or any follow-up action is required, a multi-disciplinary case review conference will be arranged.

13. Members are invited to note the contents of the paper.

Social Welfare Department
June 2006

¹ Bring-up system is a system whereby case files are regularly brought up to the attention of the officer-in-charge. Throughout the process, office-in-charge can also better understand the work of their staff and provide timely guidance and assistance in case handling.