

立法會

Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)889/09-10(13)

Ref : CB2/PL/CA

Panel on Constitutional Affairs

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 10 February 2010

Support service centres for ethnic minorities

Purpose

This paper summarizes the relevant discussion of the Panel on Constitutional Affairs (the Panel) on the establishment of support service centres for ethnic minorities.

Background

2. During the scrutiny of the Race Discrimination Bill, some members of the Bills Committee expressed grave concern over the language barrier encountered by ethnic minorities in gaining access to essential public services, in particular medical services. They stressed that discrimination in the use of language was a real issue which could and did exclude certain racial groups from essential public services and benefits, including vocational training opportunities and medical treatment. In his speech during the resumption of the Second Reading debate on the Bill on 9 July 2008, the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs informed Members that the Government had allocated \$16 million in 2008-2009 for the setting up of four support service centres in different districts to provide interpretation services for ethnic minorities.

Issues raised by the Panel

3. At its meeting on 17 November 2008, the Panel was consulted on the Administration's proposal for the establishment of two support service centres for ethnic minorities in the New Territories, one in Kowloon and the other on Hong Kong Island. It was the Administration's target to roll out the support services in March/April 2009. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's paper provided for that meeting [LC Paper No. CB(2)265/08-09(04)] for details of the proposed implementation plan. The relevant issues raised by members are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Adequacy of the interpretation service

4. According to the Administration, the objectives of the support service centres are -

- (a) to provide telephone interpretation service to those members of ethnic minorities who have difficulties communicating in English and/or Chinese, in order to facilitate their access to public services and essential non-government services which are crucial to them; and
- (b) to organize activities generally to facilitate integration of the ethnic minorities into the community.

5. It was the Administration's plan that the telephone interpretation service would be provided centrally through one of the four support service centres. In response to members' enquiry about the adequacy of the interpretation service provided for ethnic minorities in using public services, the Administration advised that the data of ethnic minority populations in Hong Kong available from the Census and Statistics Department's thematic report on ethnic minorities under the 2006 Population By-census had been taken into account in stipulating the seven ethnic minority languages required to be supported by the telephone interpretation service. The future operator for the telephone interpretation service could propose to implement the full spectrum of the seven languages in phases if it had difficulties in providing services for all the seven languages initially.

6. Members may wish to note that when the Administration reported the implementation progress of the Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality at the Panel meeting on 11 December 2009, some members suggested that the Administration should consider setting up a centralized telephone enquiry service system as a triage mechanism for handling enquiries from ethnic minorities and providing them with information about the full range of support services available to them in various ethnic minority languages.

Opening hours of the centres

7. In response to members' enquiry about the opening hours of the support service centres, the Administration informed the Panel that bearing in mind the normal operating hours of the public services involved, the centralized interpretation service centre would be open from 0800 hours to 2200 hours, seven days a week, except on general holidays, in order to assist ethnic minorities in using public services. The future operator of the centralized interpretation service centre would be required to set up an arrangement, such as on-call service, for meeting emergency requirements for interpretation outside these hours and during general holidays. The centres for provision of language training and integration programmes would be open for at least 12 hours a day and for six days a week, except public holidays.

Operating expenses of the centres

8. According to the implementation plan, a total of \$16 million had been earmarked as the operating expenses of the four support service centres in their first year of operation and an additional \$8 million to subsidize their start-up costs. Hon Emily

LAU asked whether the operating expenses would be sufficient for recruiting suitable language teachers with a bachelor's degree from a local university or equivalent, and the number of recruits envisaged. The Administration advised that \$7 million would be allocated to the support service centre providing centralized telephone interpretation services and the other three support service centres would be provided with \$3 million each. Non-government organizations which would establish and operate these centres should have ample experience and expertise to determine the number of recruits, the experience required and their remuneration levels for the purpose of serving the needs of ethnic minorities. The future operators could also hire part-time staff as appropriate to organize language programmes and integration activities for ethnic minorities in the evenings.

Performance monitoring and evaluation

9. According to the implementation plan, having regard to the proposals submitted by the operators of the support service centres in their applications, the Administration would draw up detailed output indicators to monitor and evaluate the performance of these operators. Apart from regular reports from the operators, the Administration would conduct on-site inspections and unannounced visits to observe and evaluate the activities of the centres. If and where necessary, the Administration might also conduct user surveys and/or commission an independent organization to monitor and assess the performance of the centres.

10. The Administration informed the Panel that it planned to conduct a review after the plan had been implemented for two years and would report to the Panel. Hon Mrs Sophie LEUNG expressed the view that as the plan was a new initiative, the Administration should keep the plan under review during these two years of implementation and allow room for operators to provide additional support facilities for ethnic minorities as appropriate. The Administration undertook to consider members' views.

11. Members may wish to refer to the minutes of the Panel meeting on 17 November 2008 [LC Paper No. CB(2)827/08-09] for detailed discussion of these issues.