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Panel on Welfare Services

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 26 June 2010

Integrated Family Service Centres

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the implementation of the service mode of the Integrated Family Service Centre ("IFSC"), and summarises the deliberations of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the Panel") on the subject.

Background

2. In August 2000, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") commissioned the University of Hong Kong ("HKU") to conduct an eight-month consultancy study on the review of family welfare services. The review covered major family services, viz. family services centre, senior social work practitioner, family life education service, family aide service, Family Activity and Resource Centre, Family Care Demonstration and Resource Centre cum Carers' Support Centre, family education and support services for single parent families and new arrivals under the Promoting Self-reliance Strategy package.

3. The findings and recommendations of the study are contained in the Report entitled "Meeting the Challenge : Strengthening Families" submitted by HKU in May 2001. One of the recommendations of the Report was the adoption of a new service delivery model of IFSC. An IFSC would comprise a Family Resource Unit, a Family Support Unit and a Family Counselling Unit which together would provide a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services.

4. At its meetings on 12 June 2000, and 12 March and 9 July 2001, the Panel discussed issues relating to the review of family services as well as the findings and recommendations of the consultancy study. The Administration advised

that it was in full support of the recommended direction in strengthening families through a child-centred, family-focused and community-based approach, with emphasis on establishing effective partnerships and interface with family-related services in creating a family-friendly environment in service delivery. The Administration also advised that it would adopt a bottom-up and gradual approach in launching the new model through a two-year pilot project in selected districts with an in-built evaluative study.

Implementation of IFSC pilot projects

5. As recommended by the consultant team, a Working Group on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services ("Working Group"), comprising representatives from the former Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, SWD, Social Welfare Advisory Committee, Hong Kong Council of Social Service, non-governmental organisations ("NGOs") and an independent member of the community, had been set up to give advice on the implementation of the IFSC pilot projects. To take forward the IFSC model, 15 IFSC pilot projects were selected by the Working Group in January 2002 to be implemented for two years from April 2002 to March 2004.

6. HKU was also commissioned to conduct the two-year evaluative study of the pilot projects.

7. At its meetings on 7 July and 10 November 2003, the Panel was briefed on the findings and recommendations of the Interim Report on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services submitted by the consultant team in May 2003. Findings of the evaluative study on the 15 IFSC pilot projects revealed high user satisfaction. The most noticeable aspect was that users no longer felt inhibited to come forward to seek assistance for fear of being viewed as weak and useless. Members were informed that –

- (a) the Administration fully agreed that IFSC was a more desirable mode of service delivery than the traditional family services centres ("FSCs");
- (b) the Administration aimed to transform all existing FSCs into IFSCs instead of a partial re-engineering with some FSCs operating in their conventional mode. The transformation would be done either through merging or self-transformation;
- (c) FSCs/counselling units not having sufficient resources to form an IFSC would be allowed to pool resources from other family services including family life education service, family aide service, Family Support and Resource Centres, Post-migration Centres

("PMCs") and Single Parent Centres ("SPCs"). Pooling of resources beyond the family services might also be considered if this was so requested by the concerned NGOs; and

- (d) the tentative implementation date for re-engineering existing FSCs/counselling units into IFSCs was set for April 2004.

8. In response to members' concern about staff implications, the Administration advised that the re-engineering exercise would not give rise to staff redundancy in SWD, as family service remained the core business of SWD. As regards the concern that staff working in smaller NGOs providing family services would be made redundant as a result of larger NGOs taking up all the formation of IFSCs, the Administration advised that in order to help those smaller NGOs not having sufficient FSCs/counselling units resources to form an IFSC, it had proposed to allow them to pool other family service resources and/or resources beyond family services on request. The Administration also advised that the re-engineering exercise would not reduce allocation of resources to the welfare sector.

9. Members were supportive of the new IFSC model and did not object to the pooling of resources from FSCs/counselling units to form IFSCs, but they were of the view that funding for five SPCs should continue until there were findings to support that IFSCs could meet the needs of single parents. A letter conveying members' view was sent to the Director of Social Welfare by the Chairman of the Panel on behalf of members, and copied to the Financial Secretary.

10. The Administration advised that IFSCs could meet the needs of single parents, as evidenced by the findings of the 15 IFSC pilot projects. Given the varied and comprehensive family services provided by IFSCs, single parents were able to receive more services than they could receive at SPCs. Moreover, SWD had made clear with the agencies concerned from the outset that funding to SPCs was limited to three years from 1 February 2001 to 31 January 2004. It was the Administration's aim for support services for single parent families to be integrated with mainstream family services in the long run.

Implementation of IFSC service mode

11. At its meeting on 9 May 2005, the Panel noted that the re-engineering of IFSCs was completed in 2005. Members were advised that subsequent to the re-engineering exercise, there were a total of 61 IFSCs (40 operated by SWD and 21 by NGOs) serving the whole territory and two integrated services projects operated by two NGOs in Tung Chung. An IFSC, comprising three major components, viz a family resource unit, a family support unit and a family

counselling unit, provided a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services to meet the changing needs of families residing in the locality in a holistic manner. Deputations attending the meeting, however, told the Panel that IFSCs could not totally replace the services provided by SPCs which were closed in April 2004. They urged the Administration to re-commission NGOs to operate SPCs as they considered IFSCs could not meet their specific needs.

12. The Administration advised that although it was well aware that users of SPCs had a sense of belonging there, this should not prevent the Administration from working towards more effective and efficient use of resources through re-engineering of family resources into IFSCs. As compared with a traditional FSC/counselling unit, each IFSC has a stronger staffing support (at least 12 social workers apart from a supervisor), and served a smaller designated geographical boundary with a population of 100 000 to 150 000.

13. In response to the request for providing funding to SPCs for continuous operation, the Administration advised that the re-engineering of IFSCs had just been completed and that it was monitoring the operation of IFSCs, including their collaboration with other organisations. Improvements would be made where appropriate to ensure the needs of various target groups, including single parents, were catered for. It was the Administration's intention to review the effectiveness of the operation of IFSCs one year after the completion of the re-engineering of IFSCs.

14. Members reiterated that they raised no objection to the pooling of family resources units to form IFSCs, but considered it regrettable that the Administration had ignored the request made by the Panel at the meeting on 10 November 2003 that the Administration should continue to fund SPCs until there were findings to support that IFSCs could meet the needs of single parents. The Panel looked forward to the Administration's response to the issue of the re-opening of SPCs after the completion of the review on IFSCs in one year's time.

15. The Administration subsequently advised in early 2008 that since the invitation of proposal for the review of IFSCs conducted between August and October 2007 had to be re-tendered, the earliest time to report progress to the Panel would be in the fourth quarter of 2008.

Review of IFSC service mode

16. At the Panel meeting on 9 March 2009, members noted that the Administration had commissioned HKU to conduct a review on the implementation of IFSC service delivery mode. The review covered all 61 IFSCs operated by SWD and NGOs which sought to assess the improvements

that could be made to further refine the model. The review would be completed by the end of 2009, and the Administration planned to revert to the Panel on the review findings in the first quarter of 2010.

17. Members noted that the Hong Kong Polytechnic University ("PolyU") had conducted a study on frontline staff's views and made a number of recommendations on the IFSC service mode. The Panel received views from deputations including PolyU on the implementation of IFSC service mode from the perspective of service providers. Deputations expressed grave concern about the tremendous workload faced by frontline social workers in IFSCs due to insufficient manpower to cope with the increasing service demands, taking into account that each IFSC was serving a population of 100 000 to 150 000.

18. The Administration advised that it was aware of the concerns raised by frontline social workers and staff unions about the operation mode. The Administration pointed out that the adoption of the IFSC service mode was a landmark in the development of family services in Hong Kong. Understandably, both management and frontline staff of IFSCs needed time to adjust to the substantial changes under the new mode. The Administration considered that the IFSC service mode was effective in service delivery. It would continue with the IFSC service mode, but would make improvements to further refine the mode.

19. While members did not object to the service concept of IFSCs in providing a continuum of services to individuals and families in the community, they took the view that the review underway should address the following issues –

- (a) whether the existing resources and staff establishments of IFSCs were sufficient to provide a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services to the community;
- (b) the effectiveness of IFSC services in establishing community network and preventing family problems and whether specific services provided by SPCs and PMCs could be completely replaced by services provided by IFSC; and
- (c) whether the geographical boundary of an IFSC should be reduced.

20. Pointing out that frontline staff had repeatedly raised the concern about insufficient manpower, members urged the Administration to take concrete actions to address the concern, such as providing additional resources to IFSCs pending the completion of the review underway.

21. The Panel held a further meeting on 11 May 2009 to receive views from deputations on the implementation of IFSC service mode from the perspective of service users. Deputations expressed concern about the capability of IFSCs in providing support and preventive services to the high-risk families and domestic violence cases.

22. The Administration advised that the design of IFSC service mode aimed to provide a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services so as to meet the changing needs of families in a holistic manner. IFSC social workers were versed with the procedures relating to rehousing arrangement and handling of domestic violence. Additional resources had been allocated to IFSCs over the past few years to strengthen services including those preventive in nature. For example, the launching of the Family Support Programme in 2006-2007 was to proactively outreach to vulnerable families that were unmotivated to seek help with an aim to encouraging them to receive various supportive services for preventing further deterioration of their problems. The Consultant Team would study its effectiveness in providing these services and make recommendations as appropriate.

23. Some members held the view that the integrated services provided by IFSCs could not totally replace those of the specialised units. Specifically, the former SPCs were more effective in meeting the needs of single parents. These members hoped that the review on the implementation of IFSC service mode would also study whether IFSCs could effectively meet the specific needs of single parents and new arrivals.

24. The Administration pointed out that IFSCs were more accessible to the service users having regard to the fact that there were only five SPCs in the territory before the implementation of IFSC service mode. This apart, IFSCs also organised support groups and programmes to meet the specific needs of single parents. Nonetheless, the review on the implementation of IFSC service mode included the effectiveness of IFSC services in serving specific targets such as single parents, new arrivals and ethnic minorities, etc.

25. As regards members' concern about the population served by each IFSC, the Administration advised that quite a number of IFSCs were serving the lower end of the population range proposed by the consultant. Nonetheless, the HKU Consultant Team would review whether the population size currently served by an IFSC was appropriate.

26. According to the Administration, the Consultant Team will submit the review report in the first quarter of 2010. The Administration will report progress to the Panel after examining the review report and recommendations.

Major findings and recommendations of the review

27. The HKU Consultant Team completed the review and released the report entitled "Building Effective Family Services : Review on the Implementation of the Integrated Family Service Centre Mode" on 24 May 2010. The Consultant Team made a number of observations and a total of 26 recommendations in the Review report (Chapters 7 and 8).

28. At the Panel meeting on 14 June 2010, members were advised that the Administration accepted in principle all the 26 recommendations in the Review report. SWD would take forward all the recommendations in collaboration with administrators, supervisors and frontline staff of IFSCs and other relevant parties. Where necessary, it would seek additional resources for the implementation of the recommendations. Members were further advised that SWD had/would set up working groups or liaison groups to follow up the implementation of the recommendations. SWD would regularly report the progress of its follow up of the recommendations to the Task Group on the Implementation of IFSCs, which comprised members from 11 District Social Welfare Offices and the nine NGOs operating IFSCs.

29. Noting that the Consultant Team had recorded in the Review report, among others, the major concerns of frontline social workers of IFSCs about the handling of housing assistance cases, members considered that SWD and the Housing Department should enhance communications and coordination in the referral system in respect of compassionate rehousing arrangement. Some members were concerned about the workload of frontline staff of IFSCs, taking into account that each IFSC was serving a population of 100,000 to 150,000. They considered that the Administration should examine whether the existing resources and staffing of IFSCs were sufficient to deliver the service mode of providing a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services to the community. The Panel will convene another meeting on 26 June 2010 to receive views from the deputations.

Relevant papers

30. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's papers for the meetings of the Panel on 12 June 2000, 12 March and 9 July 2001, 7 July and 10 November 2003, 9 May 2005, 9 March and 11 May 2009, and 14 June 2010 and the relevant minutes of meetings for details.