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Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Regularisation and Extension of the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the Administration's plan to regularise the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP) and extend its coverage to all 18 districts.

Background

The pilot NSCCP

2. It is the responsibility of parents to take care of their young children. To support parents who are unable to take care of their children temporarily because of work or other reasons, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has all along been providing subvention to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to run a variety of child care services.

3. In his 2008-09 Budget Speech, the Financial Secretary announced that an additional funding of \$45 million would be provided for a period of three years to promote child care services which offer greater flexibility to meet the needs of parents. With this time-limited funding, SWD launched the three-year pilot NSCCP in October 2008, which aims to provide parents with more flexible child care services in addition to the regular ones and at the same time promote community participation and mutual assistance in the neighbourhood. There are two service components under the NSCCP, namely home-based child care service for children aged under six, and centre-based care groups for children aged three to under six. Carers in the neighbourhood are recruited and trained to take care of children at the carers' homes or at centres run by the service operators.

4. The NSCCP was first launched in October 2008 in six districts with a higher demand for child care services, i.e. Tung Chung, Sham Shui Po, Kwai Chung, Tuen Mun, Yuen Long and Kwun Tong. In March 2009, it was extended to five other districts, namely Wong Tai Sin/Sai Kung, Kowloon City/Yau Tsim Mong, Tai Po/North, Sha Tin and Eastern/Wan Chai, thereby covering all the 11 administrative districts of SWD. The 11 projects are operated by 11 different NGOs, including subvented NGOs and non-subvented district organisations / mutual help groups. All the 11 projects under the pilot NSCCP will end on 31 March 2011.

5. SWD requires each of the 11 NSCCP operators to provide a minimum of 26 home-based child care places and 14 centre-based care group places at any time during their operating hours. These 11 projects provide a total of at least 286 home-based child care places and 154 centre-based care group places. For service quality assurance, the service agreement for the NSCCP specifies that both home-based child care service and centre-based care groups have to be managed, supervised and monitored by registered social workers. Social workers also provide initial and on-going assessment on the suitability of their home-based child carers.

6. The fees for the NSCCP service are determined by service operators with prior approval from SWD. At present, the basic fees for home-based child care service range from \$18 to \$24 per hour while those for centre-based care groups range from \$13 to \$24 per hour. Service operators of the NSCCP take into account the Median Monthly Domestic Household Income of service users and provide families passing the social need and means tests with fee waiver or half fee reduction.

Review of the pilot NSCCP

7. The three-year pilot NSCCP is coming to an end in March 2011. SWD has undertaken to review its operation and effectiveness before the end of the pilot with a view to deciding on the way forward for the service. In conducting the review, SWD has made reference to the following –

- (a) monthly statistical returns on service output and outcome regularly submitted by the 11 NSCCP service operators, and the customer satisfaction surveys conducted by them;

- (b) views of service operators, service users, home-based child carers, social workers / project-in-charge and other stakeholders collected at the sharing / focus group meetings convened by SWD; and
- (c) comments and views received via other channels from stakeholders and concerned groups in the community, including Legislative Councillors, District Councillors, the child care sector, women's groups, local community groups and the media, etc.

8. The major findings of SWD's review are summarised as follows –

- (a) Customer satisfaction surveys conducted by service operators and the views collected at SWD's sharing and focus group meetings indicated that service users were generally satisfied with the NSCCP service. Since the full launch of the NSCCP in April 2009 up to September 2010, the total number of children benefiting from the NSCCP was 8 872. The number of monthly beneficiaries steadily increased from 273 in April 2009 to 524 in September 2010, demonstrating the growing popularity of the NSCCP among parents. Upon encouragement by SWD, the service operators increased their capacity on top of the minimum requirement set by SWD in order to meet the service demand. The supply of service places could largely satisfy the service demands. SWD had not received any report of needy children having to wait for the service because of insufficient service places;
- (b) Amongst the service users, about 46% received fee waiver or reduction from service operators. Of these, around 78.7% received fee waiver while the remaining 21.3% received half fee reduction. SWD had not received any report on needy families not being given fee waiver or reduction because of insufficient resources on the part of the service operators;

- (c) Amongst the service users⁽¹⁾, 59.5% of the families were from single parent families, 18.2% from new arrival families, and 10.4% from cross-boundary families⁽²⁾. These figures show that the NSCCP was useful in supporting the generally more vulnerable families;
- (d) As regards operating hours, about 36% of the service users used the NSCCP service before 8 a.m. or after 6 p.m. when full-day stand-alone child care centres and kindergarten-cum-child care centres are usually not in operation⁽³⁾. The NSCCP was thus useful and effective in filling the gaps in service hours of the regular child care services;
- (e) Around 95.8% of the home-based child care service users had applied for the NSCCP service at least one day in advance. For the remaining 5.2% of service users who requested for ad hoc / urgent service within the same day, service operators were able to arrange for them a suitable home-based child carer or arrange a centre-based care group place within 90 minutes. The NSCCP was effective in addressing the ad hoc / urgent needs for child care services of needy parents;
- (f) On the age distribution of service users, around 38% of them were under the age of three and 51.3% from three to under six. While the age limit for the service is set at under six, service operators may provide temporary services to those aged six or above in exceptional circumstances on a discretionary basis, such as when the concerned child has a sibling under six using the service or the parent / carer of the child is unable to secure alternative child care arrangement, etc., to ensure that the child concerned could be taken care of properly. Around 10.7% of service users were aged six or above. They usually required the NSCCP service on an ad hoc / urgent / occasional basis or as a bridging arrangement before their parents could work out

(1) Service users may be counted more than once if they come from families which fall under either two of the following categories: single parent, new arrival and cross-boundary families.

(2) Cross-boundary families refer to those with parents of the children being separated with one of them in Hong Kong and the other on the Mainland.

(3) Most full-day standalone child care centres and kindergarten-cum-child care centres normally operate from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Friday, and from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday. Some of them also provide extended hours service till 8 p.m., Monday to Friday, and 3 p.m. / 8 p.m. on Saturday.

the more suitable care arrangements for them; and

- (g) During the sharing and focus group meetings, feedback from home-based carers on the NSCCP was generally positive. They generally understood that the NSCCP was meant to be a mutual help support child care project rather than an employment project, and were happy to be able to contribute to the community.

9. Based on the above review findings, the Administration is of the view that the NSCCP is a desirable model for flexible child care service worth further pursuing. It can help address the varied demand for child care services from the community and is particularly useful for supplementing the gaps in the service hours and the provision of ad hoc and urgent service of regular child care services. It is also able to benefit the more vulnerable families, such as single parent families, new arrival families and cross-boundary families.

The regularisation and extension of the NSCCP

10. As announced in the 2010-11 Policy Address, considering that the NSCCP has achieved its objectives of fostering mutual help in the neighbourhood and providing flexible child care services, the Administration has decided to regularise it and extend its coverage from the current 11 administrative districts of SWD to all 18 districts to benefit more families in need. Following the regularisation, the NSCCP will be provided on an on-going basis with recurrent resources from SWD. With the extension of its coverage to all 18 districts, the NSCCP will provide at least a total of 720 child care places (468 home-based service places and 252 centre-based service places). Hence, there will at least be 280 more service places (182 additional home-based service places and 98 additional centre-based service places) compared with the provisions during the pilot stage (a minimum of 440 places comprising 286 home-based service places and 154 centre-based service places).

11. Apart from regularising and extending the NSCCP, SWD also plans to introduce a number of measures to enhance the operation of the service having regard to the experience accumulated during the pilot and the views collected at the sharing and focus group meetings. Some of the enhancements under consideration are set out below –

- (a) SWD plans to increase the resources provided for each of the

service operators for the latter to, among other things, enhance the social work support for their services which is essential for quality assurance of the services provided by home-based child carers;

- (b) At present, escort service is not a compulsory service component of the NSCCP, though some service operators are already providing such service to needy service users. From time to time, there have been requests from parents and other stakeholders for the provision of escort service under the NSCCP. SWD is exploring whether the service operators should provide escort service under the NSCCP when needed;
- (c) On service hours, the centre-based care groups under the NSCCP operate up to at least 9 p.m. on weekdays, and provide at least one service session on weekends. The service hours of the home-based child care service are even longer, i.e. from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily (including weekends and holidays). When needed, service operators may also provide service outside these service hours. Overnight service can be provided in exceptional circumstances. While the existing operating hours and flexibility of the two kinds of services under the NSCCP should be able to meet the needs of most parents who are unable to take care of their children temporarily because of work or other reasons, it is noted that during the pilot stage of the NSCCP, some service users requested for service during late evenings, early mornings or over the weekends and during public holidays. Some requested for ad hoc service within the same day. To ensure that their service needs can be addressed, SWD is exploring further extension of the operating hours of the NSCCP service and enhancing its accessibility during late evenings, early mornings and holidays; and
- (d) During the pilot stage of the NSCCP, SWD has advised service operators to provide insurance protection for home-based child carers and service users through service agreements. The insurance costs have also been included in the subsidies provided by SWD to service operators. All the 11 service operators have provided group personal accident insurance and / or public liability insurance for home-based child carers and service users. To better ensure that adequate insurance protection will be provided, SWD will require the service

bidders to include in the service proposals their proposed insurance arrangements for home-based child carers and service users. The adequacy and appropriateness of the insurance arrangement will be one of the factors that the selection panel will consider during the selection process. Before service commencement, successful bidders will also be required to confirm that the insurance arrangements have been put in place as proposed.

12. Apart from the above, SWD has also assessed in the review whether the existing service mode, level of incentive payment for home-based child carers, level of service charges and age limit of the NSCCP are appropriate. The conclusions of SWD are as follows –

- (a) Service mode – On top of providing parents with more flexible child care services, the NSCCP also aims to promote community participation and mutual assistance in the neighbourhood. Home-based child carers are therefore providing services as volunteers in the spirit of care for others. Remuneration should not be their primary consideration. At the sharing / focus group meetings, stakeholders generally indicated support for such an arrangement. The carers' sense of volunteerism has actually helped to cultivate a readily available pool of home-based child carers for meeting temporary child care service demand flexibly. We do not intend to change this arrangement;
- (b) Incentive payment for home-based child carers and service charges – The service charges and incentive payment for home-based child carers of the NSCCP are determined by service operators having regard to the service content and the circumstances of their districts. As mentioned in paragraph 6 above, families with financial difficulties will be granted fee waiving or reduction subject to their passing the social need and means tests. There has not been any report of service users not being given fee waiver / reduction because of inadequacy in resources. SWD will continue to require service bidders to provide information on their proposed service charges and incentive payment for home-based child carers in the service proposals and will give full consideration in its assessment of proposals whether the level of service charges and incentive payment are reasonable;

- (c) Age limit – As mentioned in paragraph 8(f) above, service operators may provide temporary services to those aged six or above in exceptional circumstances on a discretionary basis to ensure that the children concerned could be taken care of properly. Since the service needs of children aged six or above are quite different, we believe that the After School Care Programme targeting children aged six to 12 which provide meal service, parental guidance and education, skills learning and social activities, etc., instead of the NSCCP, can better meet their needs. We will therefore maintain the age limit of the NSCCP at under six and continue to provide services to those aged six or above only in exceptional circumstances.

13. SWD will continue to maintain close liaison with service users, service operators and other stakeholders and closely monitor the operation of the NSCCP after regularisation and extension of the service. Where necessary, further enhancements to the NSCCP service will be considered and put in place to meet the service needs.

Implementation plan

14. SWD plans to invite service proposals for the NSCCP in each of the 18 districts in the second quarter of 2011, with the target of service commencement by end 2011. Since the pilot NSCCP will end in March 2011, the existing 11 projects will be extended until the new projects commence to ensure continuity of service.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to note the Administration's plan to regularise and extend the coverage of the NSCCP.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Social Welfare Department
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