

**For discussion on
9 June 2014**

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Work Progress of the Family Council

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the work progress of the Family Council (the Council) since its reconstitution in April 2013.

Background

2. Established in December 2007, the Council has been serving as a cross-sector and cross-bureau platform for examining family-related policies and promoting a culture of loving families in the community.

3. With effect from 1 April 2013, a mandatory assessment of family implications has been introduced for all policies. Bureaux/departments (B/Ds) are required to use the three sets of family core values (i.e. “love and care”, “respect and responsibilities” and “communication and harmony”) as identified by the Council, as well as the impact on family’s structure and functions, as the basis for assessing the policies’ impact on families. They are also encouraged to consult the Council on new policies which may affect the family. To implement the new initiatives and to strengthen its advisory role, the Council has been reconstituted under a non-official Chairman, Prof Daniel Shek, with effect from 1 April 2013.

4. Following the reconstitution, the Council has been making progress in the following areas of work -

- (a) advising B/Ds on the application of family perspectives in the policy-making process;

- (b) advocating cherishing the family as a main driver for social harmony by organizing a series of territory-wide activities to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family¹ and the “Family-Friendly Employers Award Scheme”; and
- (c) conducting researches to promote better understanding on matters related to family.

Details of the Council’s major deliverables are elaborated in the ensuing paragraphs.

Application of family perspectives in the policy-making process

5. With effect from 1 April 2013, the family implications assessment has been made mandatory in all policy papers and Legislative Council (LegCo) briefs, which has become an integral part of the decision-making process within the Government. As part of the public consultation process, B/Ds are also encouraged to consult the Family Council on new policies with family implications. Towards this end, various B/Ds have proactively consulted the Council on subjects including population policy, legislative proposal on paternity leave, policy study on standard working hours, Youth Hostel Scheme, preparation of statutory town plans, community-based drug testing, long-term housing strategy and regulatory control over internet computer services centres, etc. A list of subjects which the Council’s advice has been sought is at **Annex A**.

6. The Council will continue to ensure that due weight is given to family perspectives in the policy formulation process. In the light of operational experience gained, the Council will review the effectiveness of the assessment framework, with reference to the experience and developments in overseas countries as well as the findings of related researches.

¹ The International Year of the Family was first promulgated by the United Nations in 1994.

Cherishing the Family as a Main Driver for Social Harmony

7. Recognizing that family is the cornerstone for social harmony and the basic unit for community building, the Council has been organizing various publicity programmes and campaigns to promote family core values, including the “Happy Family Campaign”², “Happy Family Info Hub”³ and “Love and Respect Thy Elders Campaign”⁴.

20th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family (IYF)

8. 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of the IYF. The themes for the 20th anniversary of the IYF, as promulgated by the United Nations, focus on exploring family-oriented policies and strategies aiming at (a) alleviating family poverty; (b) ensuring work-family balance; and (c) advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity. The Council, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders including the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, the Consortium of Institutes on Family in the Asian Region and the Social Welfare Department have joined hands to organise the following activities to echo the themes of the IYF –

- (a) a series of territory-wide publicity programmes throughout the year of 2014 to underline the importance of family;
- (b) a Family Summit⁵ held on the International Day of Families on 15 May 2014 and a regional symposium to be held in the

² The territory-wide Campaign aimed at reinforcing and further promoting family core values through different forms of collaboration with various stakeholders. Activities in the Campaign included roving exhibition, book publication, television and radio programmes, experience sharing, workshops and other promotional programmes.

³ It is a multi-sectoral, inter-disciplinary and interactive support network and platform for exchange of information. It seeks to promote family core values and introduce family education as well as support services for the family, with a view to better addressing the multifarious needs of families and enhancing the role of the family as a main driver for social harmony. Since its launch in May 2010, it has been very well-received. The average monthly hit rate is about one million.

⁴ Recognising that members of different generations and genders could contribute to harmonious family relationships, the Council joined hands with the Commission on Youth, the Elderly Commission and the Women’s Commission to launch various initiatives, including territory-wide publicity programmes, performance of drama, workshops, exhibition, under the “Love and Respect Thy Elders” Campaign.

⁵ The Family Summit was successfully concluded with more than 500 people from different sectors of the community participated. It provided a platform for various stakeholders to examine family issues from an inter-disciplinary and innovative perspective.

fourth quarter of 2014 to raise public awareness on family-related issues; and

- (c) production of family education packages to address the needs of young families and New Arrival families for release in the third and fourth quarters of 2014.

2013/14 Family Friendly Employers Award Scheme

9. The Council has played a leading role in promoting wider adoption of family-friendly employment practices (FFEPs) in the community. In 2011, the Council organized the first Award Scheme which attracted the participation of more than 1,100 companies. In view of the success, the Council agreed that the Award Scheme should be organized on a biennial basis and expanded the scope to cover non-business sectors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social enterprises. In September 2013, the Council launched the “2013/14 Family Friendly Employers Award Scheme”. By the close of applications in January 2014, a total of 1,814 companies/organizations had enrolled, representing an increase of 60% as compared to the first Award Scheme. A presentation ceremony will be held on 19 June 2014 (Thur) to present “Distinguished Awards” to 34 corporations, 37 small and medium enterprises and 20 organisations. We will continue our promotion efforts on FFEPs in the community.

Research Work

10. To promote better understanding of matters relating to family, the Council has been engaging tertiary institutions / research organizations to conduct researches and surveys. In 2014, the research teams commissioned by the Council have completed the “Study on the Phenomenon of Divorce in Hong Kong” (the Study) and “2013 Family Survey”.

Study on the Phenomenon of Divorce in Hong Kong

11. The Study was a comprehensive study⁶ covering both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the issue of divorce in Hong Kong. It aimed to identify and understand the demographic and socioeconomic patterns, trend of divorce, the risk and protective factors, impacts of divorce as well as the needs of divorced families in Hong Kong.

12. Major findings of the Study are summarized as follows –

- (a) the average length of marriage lasted around 11.5 to 12.7 years amongst the divorcing couples⁷;
- (b) the total number of divorce decrees granted in 2012 (23,255 cases) had increased more than tenfold as compared to 1981 (2,062 cases). The proportion of divorced/separated individuals increased from 2.7% in 2001 to 4.4% in 2011. It is estimated that the proportion of children affected by divorce has risen from 4% in 2001 to 7% in 2011⁸;
- (c) divorced households were found to face a high financial pressure and showed an unfavourable trend in their income. The median monthly household for divorced household (with children aged 18 or below) has dropped in the past decade (\$10,000 in 2001 to \$9,500 in 2011), in contrast to an increase in median household income in all household over the same period;
- (d) regarding the housing condition, the proportion of divorced households living in government rentals had increased (from 44% in 2001 to 57% in 2011), whilst the proportion of private housing had decreased over the same period (from 41% to

⁶ The study covered 1 200 divorced couples in 1999 to 2011.

⁷ This may be dependent upon the number of children that the couples bear with their marriages. The proportion of couples with no children filing divorce has increased over the years, and their average length of marriage is seven years. For couples with one to two children, their marriages last for an average of 14.3 years. For couples with three or more children, their marriage last for an average of 22.2 years.

⁸ From 57,140 (4% of 2001 children population) to 80,780 (7% of 2011).

28%);

- (e) factors that may lead to an unbalanced married life and subsequent conflicts include weak relationship foundation, age gap between the couples, the adjustment of new parenthood, living with extended family members, etc.; and
- (f) impacts of divorce on the emotional health of affected adults and children, as well as academic motivation of children are generally negative.

13. A summary of recommendations put forward by the Study is at **Annex B**. The Council will follow up on the recommendations of the Report with relevant B/Ds and map out the work plan as appropriate.

2013 Family Survey

14. The Council is mindful of the challenges faced by the Hong Kong families. With a view to understanding the current state of Hong Kong families in a more comprehensive manner, biennial survey has been conducted on a regular basis since 2011 to cover a wide range of areas, including attitudes on family core values, work-life balance, parenthood, family functioning and satisfaction with family life, etc. The 2013 Family Survey⁹ has been completed, with major findings as follows –

- (a) most traditional family values¹⁰ were still quite prevalent, but not strong (from 13% to 50%);
- (b) majority of the respondents were willing to live with their parents (65%) and support their living (87%);
- (c) a large proportion of the respondents agreed that marriage was a necessary step in life (60%) and child bearing was important in a marriage (53%);

⁹ The fieldwork was conducted from May to October 2013, with a sample size of 2 000 respondents.

¹⁰ Traditional family values in the survey include (a) having son to continue family name, (b) family disgrace should be kept within the family, (c) having a son is better than having a daughter and (d) working hard to bring honour to the family.

- (d) more than half of the respondents accepted divorce as the best solution for a married couple who could not live together harmoniously provided that they did not have children (57%);
- (e) majority of the respondents considered that their families functioned very well (72%) and they were satisfied with family life (76%);
- (f) quite a number of parent-respondents found the stress of raising their children overwhelming (64%); and
- (g) nearly half of the respondents found it difficult to balance family and work (45%).

15. The findings indicated that families in Hong Kong in general functioned quite well and respondents were satisfied with their family life. However, findings on the stress of raising children as well as balancing work and family are matters of concern. In meeting the challenges ahead, the Council will continue its endeavour to promote positive messages and values on family formation, and to counter the tendency of the community in over-emphasizing the cost and responsibilities of child-raising.

Way Forward

16. Provision of direct services to family is delivered by services agents including relevant government departments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). To achieve better synergy and optimize existing resources, the Council agreed that it should not re-invent the wheel in contemplating to provide direct services to family.

17. In the past 14 months since its reconstitution, the Council has reaffirmed its position as a high-level cross-sector and cross bureau platform in examining family-related issues. B/Ds and relevant advisory bodies have proactively briefed the Council on family-related issues, including promotion of rights and well-being of children, enhanced collaboration with the Children's Rights Forum, review on child fatality

cases, and rehabilitation services for pre-school children, etc. Looking ahead, the Council will continue its focus in the following directions –

- (a) to advise B/Ds on the application of family perspectives in the policy-making process;
- (b) to advocate for cherishing the family as a main driver for social harmony; and
- (c) to initiate research to promote better understanding of matters on family.

Advice Sought

18. Members are invited to note the work progress of the Family Council since its reconstitution in April 2013.

**Home Affairs Bureau
June 2014**

List of Subjects which the Family Council's advice has been sought

Bureaux/departments
(A) Steering Committee on Population Policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Population Policy
(B) Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of Rights and Well-being of Children
(C) Development Bureau
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reclamation Outside the Victoria Harbour and Rock Cavern/Underground Space Development
(D) Home Affairs Bureau
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Hostel Scheme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum age of marriage without parental consent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed Amendments to Chinese Permanent Cemeteries Ordinance and Chinese Permanent Cemeteries Rules
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory control over internet computer services centres
(E) Security Bureau
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based Drug Testing
(F) Department of Health and Social Welfare Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-School Rehabilitation Services
(G) Housing Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long Term Housing Strategy

Bureaux/departments
(H) Labour Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative Proposal on Paternity Leave
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Study on Standard Working Hours
(I) Planning Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of statutory town plans
(J) Social Welfare Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Report of the Child Fatality Review Panel

**Summary of Recommendations put forward by
the Study on the Phenomenon of Divorce in Hong Kong**

- The financial and housing needs of many divorced households should be addressed by strengthening the existing support from the housing and social welfare systems, such as adjusting the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance and single-parent allowance for the inflation to fit current economic situation.
- It is recommended to speed up the process of applying for compassionate rehousing and consider providing interim housing to families in need who may not qualify for conditional tenancy in public housing on compassionate ground, so as to avoid further worsening of these families' situations due to unresolved issues such as domestic violence.
- The policy makers and stakeholders should empower and release the labour force by providing adequate support and resources for the divorced families. The provision of childcare services, in particular afterschool services, should be enhanced.
- Flexible work mode and work hours should be provided for the divorced parents.
- Marital counselling at different life stages (which may include pre-marital education) may be useful to facilitate harmonious relation. Marital counselling empowers couples to make informed decisions to begin, to develop or to end their marriage, as well as to minimize negative impact on well-being of their children, and the occurrence of unhappy married life or divorce.
- Specific interventions, such as divorce education, designed for children and parents experiencing divorce can be considered.
- Divorce education increases parents' awareness of the impact of divorce on children. It generally covers information-based and skill-based education that aims to reduce disputes needed to be settled in the court. Stakeholders and policy makers may take reference from overseas' experiences, such as Singapore and the US.

- The procedure of applying for divorce should be streamlined, simplified, and improved. This could be achieved by providing additional education or assistance on the application procedure.
- Educational materials should cover important topics such as the divorce process, legal rights of both parties, criteria for custodial arrangements, etc.
- More research should be done to understand the situation better and inform policy formulation.
- Data currently available on divorced couples (e.g. educational qualifications and income) are limited.
- In view of the increasing workload of the Family Court, judicial and administrative support should be strengthened for data collection to monitor divorce trend and inform policy making.
- Policy makers and stakeholders should carry out updated evaluation studies to identify effective ways to promote mediation services.