

LegCo Panel on Welfare Services
Child Care Services

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the current provision and future development of child care services.

Background

2. Child care services aim at supporting families who have a demand for child care assistance and providing a balanced programme to meet the developmental needs of children. Child care services are operated in the form of day creche for children aged under 2, day nursery for children aged between 2 and 6, and day nursery-cum-creche centre for children aged under 6.

3. In light of the changing needs of the community, Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been working closely with the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide child care services which best suit the needs of service users. Discussions have been held with representatives from NGOs in various task groups and committees, convened by SWD and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

Current Provision of Child Care Services

a)Day nursery service

4. Apart from one Government-run day nursery providing 113 places, there were 243 aided day nurseries providing a total of 27,911 places as at 31 March 2000. In the current financial year, an amount of \$92.9 million will be given to assist NGOs to operate these services. In addition, there were 19,099 private day nursery places as at 31 March 2000. In 1999, there was a decline in the enrolment rate of aided day nurseries, from 91% in January 1999 to 88.5% in September 1999. The decline in enrolment rate was due to a number of factors including (a) decline in the child population; (b) availability of other child care arrangements, such as care by child-minders or relatives from the Mainland; and (c) economic downturn resulting in working mothers reverting to full-time housewives in some cases.

5. To better match supply with demand, discussions on the provision of aided day nursery places have taken place with the non-governmental sector. Provision of places is being adjusted having regard to a number of factors in individual districts including the child population, number of new arrival families, number of working mothers, number of single parent families, provision of kindergartens and number of low income families. Based on these socio-economic characteristics in districts and the actual enrolment and waiting list in individual centres, rationalization of provision has been carried out to adjust the capacity of nurseries. Consequently, the enrolment rate of aided nurseries has

improved from 88.5% in September 1999 to 92% in March 2000.

b) Day creche service

6. Utilization of day creches is affected by the interplay of a number of factors, such as declining birth rate and availability of other child care arrangements such as employing a child-minder or a domestic helper. The expansion of the day creche service has been frozen since 1996 and a new mode of service delivery, namely the mixed mode of nursery-cum-creche centre (for children aged under 6), was introduced so that children can stay in the same centre during their pre-primary stage. As at 31 March 2000, there were 1,241 day creche places, and Government expenditure reached \$7 million. The enrolment rate of day creches is 85%.

Development of flexible forms of child care arrangements

7. To cater for the changing needs of families, SWD and NGOs have been developing more flexible child care services as detailed below:

a) To meet parents' need for temporary child care service

8. The occasional child care service offers short term child care assistance to parents who have to stay away from home. At present, there are 230 child care centres providing a total of 717 occasional child care places. The annual cost is \$25.5 million. The service has proven to be

an effective means to combat the problem of children left unattended at home.

b) To meet the need of parents who need longer hours of child care service

9. An extended hours service has been provided in 5 child care centres to facilitate parents who cannot take their children home during the normal operating hours of the centre (8 a.m. to 6 p.m.). In light of the increasing needs of single parent families and working parents for longer hours of child care service, SWD and NGOs have made efforts to expand the service. Last month, an additional 10 subvented extended hours child care service units were set up in various child care centres. Annual recurrent subvention for these 15 units is \$1.8 million. Furthermore, the Administration is seeking Finance Committee's approval for funding to provide an additional 100 extended hours service units in child care centres (1400 places in total) in response to the increasing demand from parents, as part of the Promoting Self-Reliance Strategy. The new units will be operated in districts with a high concentration of single parents, new arrival families and working parents. The annual cost of providing these additional units is estimated to be \$16.7 million in 2000/01.

10. The extended hours service not only enables parents to take up jobs with longer working hours so as to prevent them from falling into the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) net but also facilitates CSSA recipients or unemployed parents to attend re-training

programmes or to seek employment and become self-reliant.

c) to convert day creches to day nursery-cum-creche centres

11. While recognizing that there is still a demand for the day creche service from working parents, SWD and NGOs have developed the nursery-cum-creche mode of child care centres. This arrangement is welcomed by the welfare sector as it allows flexibility in terms of service delivery and enables children to have the service in the same centre throughout the pre-primary stage. Parents also find the service more convenient. Currently, there are 7 centres providing 879 places at an annual cost of \$2.2 million. The average enrolment rate is 92%. SWD will continue to work with NGOs to change day creches into mixed mode centres when there is such a need in the district.

d) to promote mutual help child care support in the community

12. In order to provide more child care alternatives for parents working irregular hours, SWD encourages the development of informal child care support in the community. Mutual help child care centres are organised by women's group, church bodies and NGOs. They help to build a support network at the district level and promote the spirit of mutual help in the neighbourhood. At present, there are 24 mutual help child care groups. SWD provides financial assistance to these mutual help child care centres to cover their rent and rates expenditure and initial setting-up costs.

e) to promote child care service to low income families

13. SWD operates a Fee Assistance Scheme to support low income families to cover part or all of their child care centre fees. Families who are eligible can apply through the social security field units of SWD. The claim rate for fee assistance was 57% in 1999/2000. Government expenditure on fee assistance is estimated to reach \$368 million in 2000/01, representing a 48% increase over the past 5 years.

f) to promote a child-minding service

14. In order to provide a more flexible mode of child care for parents who may have irregular work patterns, the development of a child-minding service has been discussed among SWD, Hong Kong Council of Social Service and NGOs. At present, two NGOs are organising training programmes for persons who are interested in taking up child-minding duties and to assist in matching of child-minders to families in need of the service. Parents who have used this service find it a useful alternative to traditional child care arrangements.

15. To take the matter forward, the Administration is seeking Finance Committee's approval for funding to set up 5 single parent centres, one in each of the 5 SWD Regions. Apart from providing support services for single parents, these centres will arrange training programmes on child-minding for single parents who would like to take up child-minding, and facilitate matching between parents and child-minders. This will help to provide a convenient and flexible form of child care arrangement for working parents, as well as assisting single

parents to become self-reliant.

g) publicity

16. To promote the service to parents in need of child care assistance, posters and pamphlets are distributed through various SWD and NGO service units, government departments and other local organizations. In 1999, over 500,000 copies were distributed. Publicity messages aiming at arousing public awareness of the danger of leaving children unattended at home and the child care services available are channelled through the mass media including radio, television and newspapers. Moreover, 296 programmes attended by over 90,000 participants were organised in 1999 to promote the services. Publicity will continue to be launched to publicise the services available to parents in need.

h) to enhance service quality

17. Regular inspection of child care centres by the Child Care Centres Advisory Inspectorate and implementation of the Funding and Service Agreements developed by SWD and NGOs, ensures that service quality in child care centres is maintained. To further enhance the quality of pre-primary services, a Committee on Early Childhood Education was set up in October 1999 under the Curriculum Development Council with membership from, inter alia, the child care sector and SWD. This Committee will review the role of early childhood education, the interface between early childhood education and primary education, evaluation on early childhood education

strategies, parent education and make recommendations to the Curriculum Development Council. The quality of the service will also be improved by upgrading the academic requirements of child care workers to include Chinese Language or Chinese Literature in the two passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education through legislative amendment to the Child Care Centres Regulations.

The Way Forward

18. There have been calls for further harmonization of pre-primary services provided by kindergarten and child care centres. While serving similar age groups, kindergartens and child care centres are operated with different emphasis on the education and care elements respectively, to serve different social needs of the parents and are regulated by different departments with different sets of regulations. Based on the recommendations made by the Reconstituted Working Party on Kindergarten Education in 1995, harmonization of various aspects of kindergarten and child care centre operation has been progressing over the years. Measures include adopting the same curriculum guidelines for children in both types of service, the same curriculum in the training of kindergarten teachers and child care workers, the same qualification and salary scales for both of them, and a number of operational arrangements.

19. Arising from the Review of the Education System conducted by the Education Commission in 1999, a Working Group has been convened by the Education Department and SWD, with the participation of the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Health and Welfare Bureau, to

review kindergarten and child care centre operations, with a view to making further progress towards the goal of harmonization. Amongst other things, the Working Group will discuss the need to review the planning standards for kindergartens and child care centres, the mode of financing for needy families, upgrading of staff qualifications and improvement of training for kindergarten teachers and child care workers etc.

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