

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)2819/11-12

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Panel on Welfare Services

**Minutes of special meeting
held on Wednesday, 14 March 2012, at 10:45 am
in Conference Room 1 of the Legislative Council Complex**

Members present : Hon CHEUNG Kwok-che (Chairman)
Hon WONG Sing-chi (Deputy Chairman)
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, SBS, JP
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, SBS, JP
Hon Paul CHAN Mo-po, MH, JP
Hon IP Wai-ming, MH
Dr Hon PAN Pey-chyou
Dr Hon Samson TAM Wai-ho, JP
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung

Members absent : Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon CHAN Kam-lam, SBS, JP
Hon Ronny TONG Ka-wah, SC
Dr Hon LEUNG Ka-lau
Hon WONG Kwok-kin, BBS

Public Officers attending : Item I

Mrs Anna MAK
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services)
Social Welfare Department

Ms Caran WONG
Assistant Director (Family and Child Welfare)
Social Welfare Department

Mr LUI Kwong-fai
Chief Manager / Management (Support Services) 2
Housing Department

Mr LEUNG Ho-yin
Atg Chief Housing Manager / Applications
Housing Department

**Attendance by : Item I
invitation**

Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association,
Social Work Officer Grade Branch

Mr Sam LEUNG Kin-hung
Chairman

The Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory Council

Ms LAU So-ying
Executive Director

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Mr Moses MUI
Chief Officer (Family and Community)

Caritas Family Service

Miss Eliza LAM
Supervisor

Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association,
Social Work Assistant Branch

Mr NG Pak-tung
Chairman

Concern Group on Integrated Family Services of the
Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union

Mr Rivalino CHUNG Wai-lung
Member

Hong Kong Family Welfare Society

Ms Shirley NG
Senior Manager

Hong Kong Social Workers Association

Ms Paulina KWOK
Member of Current Welfare Issues Committee

Clerk in attendance : Miss Betty MA
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Ms Candice LAM
Senior Council Secretary (2) 4

Miss Maggie CHIU
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

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I. Implementation of the Integrated Family Service Centre Service Mode

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)490/11-12(04), CB(2)1277/11-12(01), CB(2)1304/11-12(01) to (05), CB(2)1317/11-12(01) to (02), CB(2)1355/11-12(01) and CB(2)1395/11-12(01) to (02)]

At the invitation of the Chairman, Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services) ("DDSW(S)") and Chief Manager/Management (Support Services)2 of Housing Department ("CM/M(SS)2") briefly took members through the Administration's paper on the measures taken by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") and Housing Department ("HD") to address the concerns relating to handling housing assistance cases by the Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs").

2. The Chairman then invited a total of eight deputations to present views and concerns on the subject. The major concerns of the deputations are summarised in the **Appendix**.

Discussions

3. Responding to the deputations' views and concerns, CM/M(SS)2 said that to enhance communications between HD and SWD/ non-governmental

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organisation ("NGO") IFSCs in handling housing assistance cases, a Liaison Group ("LG") at headquarters level and five Local Liaison Groups ("LLGs") at district level had been set up in this respect. The setting up of LLGs was considered effective as demonstrated by a 20% reduction in the number of housing assistance cases referred by HD to IFSCs. CM/M(SS)2 further said that if the housing assistance cases were either purely housing management issues or purely on medical grounds, such cases would be handled by HD and no referral would be made to IFSCs. It was, however, noted that some existing public housing tenants had requested for household splitting or transfer because of personal and family reasons. Such cases could not be handled by HD directly under prevailing housing policies, and social welfare input was required. Prior to making a decision for referral to IFSCs, HD would carry out initial assessment of the need for such referral. Should social welfare input be considered appropriate, HD staff would, with the consent of the applicants, make use of standardized memoranda to refer the cases to IFSC social workers for follow-up. Apart from the referral mechanism, HD had put in place a reporting system to ensure that irregularities could be brought to the attention of senior management at regional level for appropriate handling or rectification.

4. Regarding some deputations' suggestion of setting up a dedicated team in HD to handle housing assistance cases, CM/M(SS)2 stressed that to ensure the effective use of the limited resources for public rental housing, the housing policy was to provide affordable housing for the low-income families.

5. Acting Chief Housing Manager (Applications)/ Housing Department ("Ag CHM(A)) added that HD staff had explained clearly to the applicants of housing assistance cases that their cases had to be referred to IFSCs for expert comments if initially vetted by HD to be superficially justified, and more importantly, the referrals did not necessarily mean that their requests would be approved. It was noteworthy that while HD had referred about 20% of the housing assistance cases to IFSCs for follow-up, and SWD held different views on the necessity for referral on two cases only.

6. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan said that to his knowledge, in many housing clearance cases, HD staff had advised those affected residents who did not meet the eligibility criteria for public rental housing units to contact social workers for compassionate rehousing. In his view, HD should review the rehousing policy and delineate clearly the roles of HD and IFSCs in handling compassionate rehousing arrangement.

7. Ag CHM(A) advised that carees would be allocated with public rental housing units in accordance with the established policies and

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procedures for clearance projects. For those who did not meet the eligibility criteria for rehousing to public rental housing but had expressed other medical/social justifications for imminent rehousing, the cases would be referred to SWD for consideration of compassionate rehousing.

8. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan noted with concern about the increasing number of housing assistance cases handled by IFSCs and enquired whether additional manpower had been provided to cope with the increasing service demand and the impact on the service for core business of IFSCs. DDSW(S) advised that the number of IFSC social workers had been increased from 896 in 2004-2005 to 1 056 in 2011-2012, representing an increase of about 20%. In 2012-2013, three new IFSCs would be established and additional number of social workers would be provided correspondingly.

9. Mr IP Wai-ming was of the view that the crux of the problem could only be resolved from the policy perspective, and not at the operational level. He was disappointed at the non-attendance of senior officials from HD to the meeting. Mr IP considered that HD should consider engage its own social workers to handle housing assistance cases so as to streamline the workflow.

10. The Chairman advised that the Panel had requested the attendance of an Assistant Director from HD to the meeting.

11. CM/M(SS)2 clarified that his senior officials were unable to attend the Panel meeting due to prior commitment. CM/M(SS)2 pointed out that LG and LLGs had reviewed and streamlined the work procedures on handling housing assistance cases and implemented various improvement measures, bearing in mind the likely impact on other waitlistees for public rental housing. As explained earlier, the decision to refer cases on social grounds to IFSCs would be initially assessed by HD. For those cases recommended by IFSCs but were subsequently rejected by HD, such cases would be brought to the attention of senior management. As such, HD did not see the need to engage its own social workers to handle housing assistance cases.

12. Ms LI Fung-ying appealed to HD and SWD to enhance collaboration with a view to providing one-stop service in respect of housing assistance cases.

13. DDSW(S) advised that dedicated roles and responsibilities were assumed by SWD and HD. It was noted that the number of housing assistance cases requiring social welfare input had been reduced after the setting up of LG and LLGs. DDSW(S) pointed out that it was no easy

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task to define whether individual housing assistance cases were purely tenancy matters as housing needs and welfare needs were always interwoven. IFSC services could provide appropriate assistance to the families concerned. She believed that written referrals from HD to IFSCs and the reporting system on irregularities would help manage expectations of the applicants which sometimes could be unrealistic. DDSW(S) added that in view of the finite resources for public rental housing and the lead time for formulating new policy, it would be practical arrangement to handle housing assistance cases under the existing referral and communication mechanisms for the time being.

14. Referring to some deputations' concerns about the manpower and experience of IFSC staff, DDSW(S) advised that most of IFSC staff were experienced social workers who had attained more than five years of working experience before joining IFSCs. She added that the service hours of IFSCs varied among districts having regard to the specific needs of individual districts.

15. Dr PAN Pey-chyou was concerned that some applicants of housing assistance cases would abuse the system if all the requests from service users or tenants of public rental housing were approved. Moreover, this would be unfair to other waitlistees for public rental housing. In his view, it was of paramount importance for HD to uphold an equitable allocation system for public rental housing. To this end, HD should draw up clear guidelines for circumstances under which requests for compassionate rehousing, and household splitting and transfer by existing public housing tenants would be considered favourably.

16. With reference to his experience in handling housing assistance cases, Mr Frederick FUNG cited that there were occasions on which NGO IFSC social workers turned down certain requests in the first place, but such cases were subsequently followed up by SWD IFSCs after these cases were referred by HD to IFSCs for social welfare input. He considered it inappropriate for IFSC social workers to turn down requests for housing assistance right away, nor was it appropriate for HD staff to assess whether social welfare input was required for the cases. In his view, HD and SWD should jointly examine the respective professional roles of HD and IFSC staff in handling housing assistance cases.

17. DDSW(S) elaborated on the delineation of responsibilities between SWD/NGO IFSCs and HD on handling different housing assistance requests. For compassionate rehousing cases, SWD/NGO IFSCs would conduct assessment on social and/or medical grounds and give recommendations to HD for consideration of allocating public rental housing units. Unless with substantive social and/or medical grounds,

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requests for specific location were generally not advisable as compassionate rehousing aimed at helping families with genuine and imminent housing needs while location preference would inevitably limit the choice of public rental housing units and prolong the processing time. Any compassionate rehousing cases being rejected by IFSCs would be reviewed by the senior management, e.g. case review was done by Assistant District Social Welfare Officer for cases handled by SWD IFSCs, and Service Supervisors for cases handled by NGO IFSCs. DDSW(S) said that on the other hand, other housing assistance cases on purely medical grounds would be handled directly by HD, without the need to refer the cases to SWD/NGO IFSCs for social welfare input. CM/M(SS)2 affirmed the delineation of responsibilities between HD and IFSCs in handling housing assistance cases on medical and/or social grounds.

18. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung noted with concern that instead of turning down unjustifiable housing assistance cases right away, HD staff were inclined to advise difficult clients to seek assistance from IFSC social workers before their cases were to be further processed by HD. This had not only given rise to unrealistic expectations of the applicants, but also overwhelmed the workload of IFSC staff. SWD should deploy more resources for strengthening the manpower of IFSCs to handle housing assistance cases. Moreover, the Administration should increase the supply for public rental housing units with a view to resolving the problem at root.

19. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung commented that the crux of problem was inadequate public rental housing resources and insufficient manpower of social workers. Consequently, service users could not get appropriate assistance.

[To allow more time for discussion, the Chairman directed that the meeting be extended for 10 minutes beyond the appointed time.]

20. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan expressed concern whether it was appropriate to task IFSC social workers to assess the eligibility of applicants for housing assistance cases. He then sought the views of deputations as to whether IFSC social workers were aware of the internal guidelines of HD on handling housing assistance cases.

21. Responding to Mr LEE Cheuk-yan, Ms Pauline KWOK of Hong Kong Social Workers Association replied in the negative. Mr Sam LEUNG of Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association said that HD and SWD had jointly drawn up guidelines on compassionate rehousing arrangement, but not other housing assistance cases.

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22. CM/M(SS)2 said that the eligibility criteria for public rental housing allocation were available on the website. HD and SWD had worked out the work procedures on handling housing assistance cases. In the event that the requests could not be handled directly by HD, HD would carry out an initial screening as to see whether social welfare input was required before making a decision to refer the cases to IFSCs.

23. At the invitation of the Chairman, the following deputations had made supplementary views -

- (a) Mr Sam LEUNG of Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association said that in handling cases on compassionate rehousing, recommendations of IFSC frontline social workers would be examined by their supervisors at various levels;
- (b) Ms LAU So-ying of Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory pointed out that other than handling housing assistance cases on medical and social grounds, IFSC social workers were getting involved in cases on political grounds; and
- (c) Ms Shirley NG of Hong Kong Family Welfare Society considered that HD should set up a dedicated team to handle housing assistance cases.

24. The Chairman considered that the crux of the matter was inadequate supply of public rental housing units. In his view, to address the concerns of IFSC social workers about handling housing assistance cases, the Administration should model on the experience of medical social workers and actively consider the feasibility of redeploying social workers from IFSCs to HD to form a dedicated team to handle housing assistance cases. To enhance the collaboration between HD and IFSC staff, the Chairman urged HD and SWD to consider organising briefing sessions for HD frontline staff on the work procedures on handling housing assistance cases by SWD/NGO IFSCs, as well as to put in place a reporting system on inappropriate referrals of housing assistance cases from HD to IFSCs.

25. DDSW(S) pointed out that a reporting system had been set up to ensure that irregularities could be brought to the attention of senior management for appropriate handling or rectification. CM/M(SS)2 stressed that HD would continue to maintain close collaboration with SWD in handling housing assistance cases and would review the work procedures as appropriate.

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II. Any other business

26. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 1:04 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
21 September 2012

Panel on Welfare Services

Special meeting on Wednesday, 14 March 2012 at 10:45 am

Implementation of the Integrated Family Service Centre ("IFSC") Service Mode

Summary of views and concerns expressed by deputations

No.	Name of deputation	Major views and concerns
1.	Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association, Social Work Officer Grade Branch [LC Paper No. CB(2)1317/11-12(01)]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● collaboration between the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") and the Housing Department ("HD") had been enhanced in handling housing assistance cases. However, as a result of contracting out services of the HD Customer Service Centre and the Estate Offices, HD staff would usually advise the public rental housing tenants or applicants to first seek assistance from Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs ") in relation to housing assistance cases ● compassionate rehousing cases should be handled by non-governmental organisation ("NGO") IFSCs whereas SWD IFSCs would provide support to referral cases from NGO IFSCs such that SWD IFSCs could focus on handling Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") cases and statutory matters ● the following operational problems of IFSCs were highlighted - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) most IFSC social workers were less experienced staff; (b) social workers spent substantial time in explaining housing policies and procedures; (c) opening hours of IFSCs should be extended; and (d) a lack of operational manual for IFSC staff.
2.	The Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the delineation of responsibility between HD and IFSC staff in handling housing assistance cases remained unclear

No.	Name of deputation	Major views and concerns
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● HD frontline staff should explain to the applicants for housing assistance cases why they did not meet the eligibility criteria, instead of asking the applicants to seek assistance from IFSC social workers ● HD should make written referrals to IFSCs for following up on the welfare needs of the applicants
3.	The Hong Kong Council of Social Service [LC Paper No. CB(2)1395/11-12(01)]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the setting up of communication mechanisms at different levels had helped enhance the collaboration between IFSCs and HD as well as streamline the procedures in handling housing assistance cases ● statistics showed that the number of housing assistance cases under the category of medical ground handled by IFSCs had reduced by 19% from the first quarter of 2011 to the fourth quarter of 2011, but cases under the category of medical and social grounds had increased by 20% in the same period ● the assessment and approval of housing assistance cases should be made by HD, whereas IFSC social workers should provide professional advice in relation to family welfare matters
4.	Caritas Family Service [LC Paper No. CB(2)1395/11-12(02)]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the core business of IFSCs should be providing a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial family services ● HD should make clear the policy and enhance transparency in the assessment of eligibility criteria in respect of housing assistance cases ● HD staff should avoid giving unrealistic expectation to applicants of housing assistance cases by asking them to seek assistance from IFSC social workers to pursue their requests ● HD should consider deploying additional manpower to handle housing assistance cases which were related to housing issues, and IFSC social workers would provide support to the welfare needs of the applicants as appropriate
5.	Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association, Social Work Assistant Branch [LC Paper No. CB(2)1317/11-12(02)]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● coordination and communication between HD and SWD were satisfactory at senior management level after setting up the liaison mechanism for handling assistance cases, but not the frontline level. It was noted that in some districts, 50% to 70% of IFSC cases were related

No.	Name of deputation	Major views and concerns
		<p>to housing issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● applicants of housing assistance cases were usually advised by HD staff that their requests would be considered favourably if they were recommended by IFSC social workers on social grounds; this had given rise to unrealistic expectation of the applicants and created unnecessary workload on IFSC social workers ● as only SWD IFSCs could handle CSSA custody cases and make recommendations for compassionate rehousing in addition to the core business of IFSCs, this had resulted in the misperception of NGO IFSC social workers were not so professional as compared with SWD IFSC social workers
6.	<p>Concern Group on Integrated Family Services of the Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union [LC Paper No. CB(2)1304/11-12(03)]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● IFSCs should focus on family services ● it was inappropriate for HD staff to advise applicants of housing assistance cases to seek recommendations from IFSC social workers to support their applications, as this would impose unnecessary workload on IFSC social workers and cause hardship of IFSC social workers in managing the unrealistic expectation of service users. As a matter of fact, most applicants refused to receive IFSC follow-up service on their welfare needs ● the long waiting time for public rental housing units should be resolved within the ambit of the housing policy. HD should deal with all housing assistance cases and provide necessary training and support to its frontline staff as appropriate
7.	<p>Hong Kong Family Welfare Society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● social workers of SWD/NGO IFSCs had spent substantial working time on housing assistance cases which were related to purely housing management issues. HD should set up a dedicated team to handle housing assistance cases. It was inappropriate for social workers to handle such cases, which was beyond the scope of IFSC service ● the meaning of medical grounds and social grounds for the purpose of housing assistance cases was unclear
8.	<p>Hong Kong Social Workers Association [LC Paper No. CB(2)1304/11-12(04)]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● housing assistance cases constituted almost 30% of IFSC workload, but most of them were purely housing management issues which should not be handled by IFSCs. The liaison mechanism between HD and SWD was considered ineffective

No.	Name of deputation	Major views and concerns
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● HD should be responsible for handling housing assistance cases and streamlining the procedures for handling such applications, in order to avoid giving an unrealistic expectation to the applicants and to minimise disputes between HD and SWD staff in handling such cases ● it was difficult and unfair for social workers to deal with ineligible housing assistance cases which should have been rejected by HD directly without any referral made ● HD should set up a special team within the Department to deal with the administration and processing of housing assistance cases, whereas social workers would provide the necessary professional advice and assistance for those cases with genuine welfare needs

Council Business Division 2
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