

**For discussion
on 17 January 2017**

Legislative Council House Committee

Subcommittee on Children's Rights

**Review on Multi-disciplinary Case Conference and
Welfare Plans for Children**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the review of the operation of the Multi-disciplinary Case Conference on Protection of Child with Suspected Abuse (MDCC) and the implementation of welfare plans for children.

Principles

2. The Government attaches great importance to the well-being of children (including young persons aged under 18) and firmly believes that every child has a right to protection against harm and abuse. Child protection is an important area of the work of the Social Welfare Department (SWD). Adopting a “child-centred, family-focused and community-based” approach in service planning and delivery, SWD provides a range of preventive, supportive and remedial welfare services to safeguard the well-being of children.

3. Protecting children from abuse is the collective responsibility of various professionals who may come into contact with children. Effective child protection is built on the multi-disciplinary approach of working together, trusting each other and care for the welfare of the children. To uphold the best interests of children and protect those children suspected or found to be abused, SWD has drawn up the Procedural Guide for Handling Child Abuse Cases (Procedural Guide). The Procedural Guide serves as a reference for different professionals, including personnel engaged in social services, health services,

education services and law enforcement as well as those who are in close contact with children through their work, in carrying out the necessary assessments, referrals, enquiries, examinations, MDCCs and follow-up services for suspected child abuse cases.

Handling of Child Abuse Cases

4. Identified cases of suspected child abuse are handled by SWD, relevant government departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through multi-disciplinary collaboration in accordance with the Procedural Guide.

5. After receiving a referral or report of suspected child abuse, the case worker from one of the 11 Family and Child Protective Services Units under SWD or the SWD/NGO case worker handling the case of the child or the family will take up the role of case manager to co-ordinate different services rendered to the child victim. A detailed social enquiry will be conducted. Information will be collected from the child, the family and professionals with knowledge of the family by the case worker to look into the situation of the child and the family members, assess their needs and formulate an initial welfare plan. Necessary medical examinations, criminal investigations or other assessments, such as psychological or mental health assessments, will be conducted by other professionals simultaneously.

6. After completing the social enquiry and other main investigation work, the responsible unit carrying out the social enquiry will convene a MDCC, whereby professionals having a major role in the handling and investigation of the suspected child abuse case, such as medical personnel, school personnel, social workers, police officers, clinical psychologists, etc. can share their professional knowledge on the health, development and functioning of the child and the ability of parents/carers in ensuring the child's safety. The MDCC will conduct risk assessments on related factors including the physical, mental and psychosocial conditions of the child and the abuser, any undesirable habits of the abuser (including substance/drug/alcohol abuse), any stresses or crises being faced by the abuser (including marital conflicts), attitude and level of co-operation of the abuser, etc. in accordance with the Procedural Guide. The

MDCC will also formulate a welfare plan for the child and the family, and assign a key social worker to implement the welfare plan.

Review of the Mechanism of the MDCC

7. In January 2013, SWD set up a task group to review the work of the MDCC with a view to providing frontline professionals with clearer guidelines, and enhancing effective use of the MDCC platform in case assessment pertaining to risk factors of child abuse, so as to facilitate the formulation of more comprehensive and suitable welfare plans, which will minimise the risk of child abuse and ensure the well-being of children. The task group comprised representatives from various bureaux/departments and professional sectors, such as the Education Bureau, the Hong Kong Police Force, SWD, the Hospital Authority, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and NGOs providing integrated family services, youth services and residential child care services. Given the wide spectrum of stakeholders to be consulted, the task group held six plenary meetings and seven focus group meetings with specific themes. Stakeholders' views on different topics were collected in three phases via various means, including 18 consultation sessions and the issue of consultation papers.

8. Based on the consensus reached after in-depth analysis and discussions, the task group completed the MDCC review and revision of relevant parts of the Procedural Guide in October 2015. SWD uploaded the revised Procedural Guide onto the Internet in December 2015 for reference of relevant personnel and the general public. A briefing on the amendments was held for the sectors concerned. Leaflets in Chinese and English, also available in six ethnic minority languages, on the MDCC were produced for children, adolescents and parents.

Major Amendments to the Procedural Guide

9. Amendments to the Procedural Guide have been made in respect of the preparation and conducting of the MDCC and post-MDCC follow-up work. The major amendments are set out below.

Aim of the MDCC

10. To highlight its aim of protecting children, the “Multi-disciplinary Case Conference on Child Abuse” has been renamed as the “Multi-disciplinary Case Conference on Protection of Child with Suspected Abuse”. Apart from assessing the risk of further abuse to the child, the MDCC will also give more deliberation to the needs of the child and the family, so as to facilitate formulation of a suitable welfare plan.

Tasks to be performed by the MDCC

11. The revised Procedural Guide clearly sets out the issues that need to be discussed at the MDCC and lists all these issues in the sample agenda, including the risk of child abuse to the child concerned and other children in the family, the needs of the child concerned and the family, the need for a review conference and the need for a progress report on the implementation of the welfare plan. It also sets out items of the welfare plan that the discussions are deemed necessary, including the care arrangement for the child and the need for a statutory order.

12. On risk assessment, further instructions are given in the revised Procedural Guide that in addition to the risk factors and level of risk, the strengths within the family and support outside the family should also be identified to help ensure the safety and interests of the child.

Parent/child participation in the MDCC

13. In general, parents who are not the abusers will be invited to participate in the MDCC. Where appropriate, attendance by children may also be arranged. The revised Procedural Guide stipulates that parents who are suspected abusers will also be invited to participate in the MDCC, unless it is considered that the parent’s presence may seriously prejudice the welfare of the child, there is sufficient evidence that the parent may behave in such a way (e.g. violence or threats of violence) as to interfere seriously with the work of the MDCC or the parent is in an unfit state (e.g. due to drug and alcohol consumption or acute

mental health difficulty) that makes him/her unable to join the discussion effectively.

Post-MDCC arrangement

14. The revised Procedural Guide sets out more clearly factors for consideration in reconvening a MDCC should new information of the case surface after the original MDCC, and what should be included in the post-MDCC progress reports if such reports are required.

Implementation of Welfare Plans

15. A key social worker will be assigned at the MDCC to implement recommendations of the MDCC, line up multi-disciplinary collaboration in implementing the welfare plan for the child and the family, and ensure that actions taken by the responsible parties are in line with the MDCC's decisions. If the welfare plan recommended by the MDCC cannot be implemented by the key social worker or other responsible parties, the key social worker should inform MDCC members as soon as possible in order to consider reconvening a MDCC. Subject to the needs and the agreement at the MDCC, the key social worker will inform the members in writing at an agreed time (for instance, three months after the MDCC) the implementation progress of the welfare plan. The progress report will give an account of whether the welfare plan has been implemented according to the MDCC's recommendations, whether any difficulties/changes in circumstances have rendered the welfare plan unfeasible, and whether any review/revision is required.

16. When following up a child abuse case, the key social worker will provide appropriate services for the child concerned and the family, including the abuser. Aiming to ensure the well-being of the child, these services include regular visits, counselling services (such as emotion control and counselling, parenting skills and parent-child relationship), financial assistance, referral for psychological counselling service and residential care service. The key social worker will also provide group counselling and developmental programmes for the child and the family to help them overcome the adverse impacts of the

incidents, enhance personal resilience, build up self-confidence and develop positive interpersonal and family relationships.

17. Multi-disciplinary collaboration is vital in order to help children and families involved in child abuse cases. Having regard to the family's situation, the key social worker will review the parents' ability to take care of the child and the condition of the child from time to time in consultation with other professionals who are also following up the case, such as doctors, clinical psychologists and teachers. When necessary, the social worker or other personnel following up the case may call for a case conference to discuss in detail how to handle the case. If residential care services are arranged for the child, the key social worker should conduct case review meetings with the staff providing the services and other relevant professionals on a regular basis to review the case progress, assess the risk of further abuse and discuss preparations for family reunion. The supervisor of the key social worker is responsible for monitoring the discharge of the above duties until the risk of child abuse has subsided.

Advice Sought

18. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Social Welfare Department
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