

LCQ10: Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project

Following is a question by Reverend Canon the Hon Peter Douglas Koon and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (March 27):

Question:

The Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (the Care Project) aims to provide families in need of support with a flexible form of day child care service at the neighbourhood level, including centre-based care service and home-based child care service provided by home-based child carers (HCCs). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the current number of service centres under the Care Project, as well as the following information on various service centres: (i) the utilisation rate, (ii) the minimum number of places, (iii) the number of children served, and (iv) the number of applications waiting for the service;

(2) of the respective current numbers of HCCs providing care service at their own residences and other suitable places as approved by the operators, as well as their average service hours, together with a breakdown by District Council district;

(3) whether it has compiled statistics on the respective numbers of accidents causing injuries to HCCs and children since the implementation of the Care Project; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that, and whether it will consider compiling such statistics;

(4) as there are views that HCCs are unevenly distributed across the territory, whether the authorities will review the relevant reasons and establish a database, so that the manpower of HCCs can be deployed to districts with demand; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) whether it will consider discussing with the operators of the Care Project the extension of service hours of the service centres, so as to better meet the needs of dual-income parents (especially those from grass-roots families who need to work longer hours) with newborns to children up to the age of nine; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(6) as there are views that HCCs provide some sort of "volunteer" service, and that the persons concerned can become HCCs upon completion of only a few hours of basic briefing and training provided by the operators, resulting in varying service quality, whether the Government will consider promoting professionalism in the development of HCCs, such as by introducing systematic and more comprehensive training programmes and assessment mechanism, setting up an enrolment and registration system, as well as providing on-the-job

retraining and value-added programmes; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(7) whether it will consider setting up a comprehensive monitoring mechanism for HCCs, such as by conducting random checks on the operators, requiring the operators to regularly assess the performance of HCCs, imposing stringent penalties on non-compliant HCCs, setting up a transparent complaint and feedback system, as well as conducting questionnaire surveys on service users; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) The Social Welfare Department (SWD) subsidises non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to set up one service team in each of the 18 districts of Hong Kong to operate the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP). The NSCCP includes home-based child care service (HCCS) which is provided by the home-based child carers (HCCs) at their own residence or a suitable place as approved by the service operators for children aged under nine, and the centre-based care groups (CCGs) which is provided at the service centres of the service operators for children aged three to under nine. The SWD requires service operators of each district to provide not less than 53 service places, including 39 HCCS places and 14 CCG places (i.e. the total number of service places in all 18 districts should be not less than 954). Service operators can flexibly increase the number of HCCS places on top of the requirement so as to meet the actual service demand, and additional funding will be granted accordingly. Besides, the service does not require central waitlisting and parents can directly apply to the service operators for services according to their needs. Therefore, the SWD does not maintain the information on the number of applications waitlisted for the service and the average utilisation rate.

The number of children served and the number of HCCs under the NSCCP by District Council districts are set out at Annex. According to the requirements, each HCC is not allowed to take care of more than three children under the age of nine (including the HCC's own children) at the same time. The SWD does not maintain the information on the average service hours of HCCs.

(3) Since the launch of the NSCCP in 2008, the SWD has received three and four reports of accidents respectively leading to the injury of HCCs or young children, all of which were minor accidents without serious physical injuries involved. Besides, the SWD received a report of serious injury of an infant when receiving service in January this year and the case is under the investigation of the Police. All the service operators submitted reports to the SWD within three calendar days following the incidents in accordance with the service agreements signed with the SWD. The SWD will continue to take into account the circumstances of the cases and require service operators to

re-examine the assessment and service matching arrangement of the HCCS and to strengthen the training for HCCs.

(4) In order to respond more effectively to the districts' demand for day child care services, the SWD has reviewed the distribution, service needs, and training needs of HCCs in the districts. Making reference to the analysis of districts' demand for services, the SWD plans to, on the basis of one service team in each district, add one more service team each for the five districts with higher service needs, i.e. Kwun Tong, Sham Shui Po, Sha Tin, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long, in the fourth quarter of this year, increasing the number of service teams in Hong Kong from 18 to 23.

(5) Currently, the general operating hour of CCGs is from 9am/1pm to 9pm on weekdays (Mondays to Fridays) and some weekends. The SWD plans to adjust the operating hour of CCGs in the fourth quarter of this year to 9am to 9pm on weekdays, and to require service operators to provide more opening sessions on weekends. Service operators may also flexibly provide extra opening sessions to meet the service demand in respective districts.

(6) and (7) On service monitoring and quality assurance, the SWD has all along required service operators to establish mechanisms to recruit, assess, screen and train up suitable HCCs, and arrange service matching. Social workers of the service operators are required to conduct monthly home visits to HCCs who are providing services, and the child care workers of the operators are also required to provide them with monthly individual training/supervision. Apart from providing further enhanced training to HCCs on a regular basis (including child care skills, child protection awareness and home safety, etc.), service operators also need to continuously evaluate and follow up on the performance of HCCs to ensure service quality. Relevant figures on training/supervision are included in the service quality indicators, and the service operators are required to submit relevant statistical information to the SWD on a quarterly basis. The SWD, through regular and unannounced visits, assesses whether the performance of the service operators meet the requirements of the service agreement.

To enhance the NSCCP, the SWD plans to strengthen training for HCCs in the fourth quarter of this year. Trainees are required to undergo 14 hours of basic training, the content of which is standardised and formulated by the SWD, including infants and young children's physical and psychological development, special development milestones and needs of growth, care and communication skills, home safety and hygiene, handling of accidents/special accidents, etc. Trainees must pass the assessment before being arranged to provide services; and HCCs who are arranged to take care of children with special learning needs must receive an additional four hours of advanced training to acquire the knowledge and skills in caring for relevant children. Service operators are required to evaluate the child care skills and knowledge of HCCs after completing the training, their confidence in providing care services, and whether the home environment is suitable for providing care services, before arranging HCCs to provide services.