

LCQ19: Support for single-parent families

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 23):

Question:

Some psychologists have pointed out that children from single-parent families may easily develop complex emotions and hence are prone to exhibit extreme behaviours. On the other hand, since the Government's cessation in 2004 of subvention for the five single parent centres (SPCs) operated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the services needed by single-parent families have been provided by the Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) under the Social Welfare Department (SWD). However, some concern groups on single-parent families have relayed to me that the services provided by IFSCs lack focus and may not meet the needs of single-parent families. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of single-parent families throughout the territory and the total number of children they had, in each of the past three years; if so, of the figures; among the requests for assistance handled by IFSCs in the past three years, of the number and percentage of those involving single-parent families;
- (2) of the support needed by the single-parent families seeking assistance from IFSCs, and the services IFSCs provide to them;
- (3) of the support provided by IFSCs to children from single-parent families who have emotional problems;
- (4) whether it reviewed in the past three years the adequacy of the support services currently provided to single-parent families and the appropriateness of the relevant arrangements; if so, of the outcome;
- (5) given that SWD plans to set up, within this financial year, a specialised co-parenting support centre to be operated by NGOs in each cluster, namely Hong Kong Island, Kowloon East, Kowloon West, New Territories East and New Territories West, which will be dedicated to providing services for divorced parents and their children, of the timetable for setting up such centres and the details of the services to be provided by them; and
- (6) whether it will consider resuming the subvention to NGOs for opening SPCs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) According to the results of the 2011 Population Census and the 2016 Population By-census, the number of single parents and the number of children aged under 18 of single parents in Hong Kong are as follows:

| | 2011 (Note 1) | 2016 (Note 1) |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| Number of single parents | 81 705 | 73 428 |
| Number of children aged under 18 of single parents | 103 937 | 93 943 |

Note 1: Information from "Hong Kong 2016 Population By-census Thematic Report: Single Parents" by Census and Statistics Department, with the number of single parents and number of children aged under 18 of single parents tabulated in Table 8.1 and Table 8.2 of the Thematic Report.

The number of cases involving single-parent families handled by the Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) of the Social Welfare Department (SWD), and the percentage of such cases in the total number of cases in the past three years are tabulated below:

| Year (Note 2) | Cases involving single-parent families | Percentage of such cases in the total number of cases |
|---------------|--|---|
| 2015-16 | 4 312 | 17.59 per cent |
| 2016-17 | 4 134 | 17.15 per cent |
| 2017-18 | 4 260 | 17.07 per cent |

Note 2: The figures for 2015-16 and 2016-17 were the numbers of cases as at March 31, 2016 and March 31, 2017, whereas the figure for 2017-18 was the number of cases as at December 31, 2017.

(2) and (3) The support required by single-parent families includes enhancing parenting skills, strengthening parent-child relationship, handling children's emotional problems as well as providing mental health education for parents and their children.

The IFSCs are concerned about the service needs of single-parent families and, through early identification and intervention, provide timely support to enhance their positive functioning. The support services provided by the IFSCs for single-parent families are as follows:

Integrated family services

The IFSCs provide a spectrum of preventive, supportive and remedial welfare services for individuals and families in need (including single-

parent families and single-parent children with emotional problems). These services include family life education, parent-child activities, enquiry services, volunteer training, outreaching service, groups and programmes, intensive counselling, financial assistance and referral services. To address the needs of single-parent families, the IFSCs organise groups and programmes specially designed for them (such as mutual help groups and talks), and provide them with appropriate services (including training on how to achieve effective parenting, handle children's emotional problems, and face life challenges positively).

Besides, if the children concerned suffer from emotional problems, the IFSCs' social workers will provide appropriate support based on their condition, including intensive counselling on emotion. If the children are assessed by social workers as having the need to receive clinical psychological service, social workers will make referrals so as to enable the children in need to receive appropriate psychological counselling service.

Family support programme

The SWD, through the IFSCs and related service units, provides more in-depth support and outreaching service by proactively contacting and serving the hard-to-reach individuals or families in need, such as those prone to the problems of domestic violence, mental illness and social isolation but unwilling to seek assistance (including single-parent families).

(4) and (6) In the past three years, the SWD did not conduct any review on the support services for single-parent families. Nevertheless, the SWD commissioned the University of Hong Kong at an earlier time to conduct a consultancy study on the review of family services. The scope of the review included the support services for single-parent families. During the review, the consultant team met the service users of Single Parent Centres (SPCs) to collect their views.

As pointed out in the review report, small-scale and independently run centres (including the five SPCs that the SWD ceased to provide subvention in 2004) might not be cost-effective in service delivery since their services and use of resources were somewhat fragmented and overlapping. Furthermore, the locations of these SPCs might not be easily accessible to the majority of service users. All in all, the consultant team recommended an integrated mode for delivering family services under the guiding principles of "accessibility", "early identification", "integration" and "partnership". The IFSCs operated by the SWD or subvented non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which adopt a community-based concept in the provision of traditional family services, and extend their service hours through pooling of resources, could provide more effective and convenient support services for families in need (including single-parent families) as compared to those independently run SPCs.

Therefore, the SWD has no plans to reopen the SPCs. However, the SWD will continue to provide integrated services through the IFSC service mode for single parents/single-parent families, including, apart from the provision of SPCs' services, the provision of those services that are not

available in the SPCs (such as intensive counselling and the arrangement of clinical psychological counselling).

(5) The SWD plans to set up five co-parenting support centres to be operated by NGOs in the fourth quarter of 2018 at the earliest to render services to separated/divorced parents and their children, including co-parenting counselling, parenting co-ordination service, structured parenting groups or programmes, child-focused counselling/groups or programmes, as well as children contact service. The services concerned are currently in the planning stage, with details to be finalised.