

LCQ7: Support services for single-parent families

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 30):

Question:

The number of cases in which divorce decrees were granted by the court rose from 6 295 in 1991 to 17 196 in 2016, representing a rate of increase of 1.7 times. Moreover, there were 73 428 single parents in Hong Kong in 2016, of whom more than 30 per cent were recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance. On the other hand, the Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) provide social services for single-parent families at present. However, there are comments that the services currently provided by IFSCs for single-parent families are neither comprehensive nor persistent. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of requests for assistance from single parents handled by the various IFSCs in each of the past five years, with a breakdown by (i) catchment district and (ii) type of issues pertaining to the requests for assistance, as well as the respective percentages of such numbers in the total; the average time taken for handling such cases; the criteria adopted by IFSCs for making the decision to close a case;

(2) of the current (i) staff establishment, (ii) average number of cases handled by each social worker, and (iii) annual operational expenditure, of each IFSC; whether SWD has reviewed the operation and staff establishment of IFSCs on a regular basis;

(3) given that IFSCs currently provide services through a district-based approach, whether the cases of the two parties of separated/divorced couples who reside in different catchment districts are handled by the social workers from different IFSCs; if so, how the authorities ensure that the social workers concerned maintain effective communication with each other in order to comprehensively assess the needs of such separated/divorced couples;

(4) given that SWD will set up five one-stop co-parenting support centres (CPSCs) to be operated by non-governmental organisations in the current financial year, of the (i) address, (ii) estimated annual expenditure, and (iii) staff establishment of each CPSC;

(5) of the number of cases for which services have been provided under the Pilot Project on Children Contact Service since its commencement in September 2016; given that SWD intends to regularise the project and incorporate the relevant service into CPSC's scope of services, of the relevant details and implementation timetable;

(6) whether it will set up specialised service units (e.g. one-stop support centres for single-parent families) to provide comprehensive support services for separated/divorced families; and

(7) given that default in alimony payments is a major problem faced by single-parent families, whether the Government will consider setting up a managing organisation or monitoring mechanism for alimony to help address the problem?

Reply:

President,

After consulting the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB), my consolidated reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) 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 five years are tabulated below:

Year (Note)	Cases involving single-parent families	Percentage of such cases in the total number of cases
2013-14	4 690	19.20 per cent
2014-15	4 546	18.52 per cent
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: The figures for 2013-14 to 2016-17 were the numbers of cases as at March 31 of the respective years, whereas the figure for 2017-18 was the number of cases as at December 31, 2017.

The SWD does not have the breakdown of cases involving single-parent families by service district and by type of issues pertaining to the requests for assistance.

If it is concluded upon assessment by the IFSCs' social workers that no further assistance is required by the individuals concerned and their families, the social workers will close the cases with the consent of those individuals. If the individuals concerned and their families have other service needs due to changes in circumstances after the closure of cases, they may seek assistance from the IFSCs again. The SWD has not collated information on the average time for handling such cases.

(2) The SWD will, taking into account the service needs and characteristics of different districts, arrange suitable manpower for the IFSCs, including officers-in-charge (Social Work Officer rank), frontline social workers

(including Assistant Social Work Officers, Senior Social Work Assistants and Social Work Assistants) and auxiliary staff (including Assistant Clerical Officers, Clerical Assistants and Workman IIs). At present, the staffing establishment of each IFSC, in accordance with district service needs, case complexity and caseload arrangements, is in the range of 21 to 36 posts.

As the nature of cases is getting more and more complicated, the SWD has from time to time enhanced social worker manpower for the IFSCs since the adoption of the integrated family service mode. To introduce the concepts of co-parenting and parental responsibility as early as possible, enhance parents' capability in coping with divorce as well as strengthen family functioning through district-level coordination, the SWD will strengthen the manpower of IFSCs in 2018-19, increasing the number of social workers serving in the IFSCs from 679 in 2004-05 to 833 in 2018-19. The SWD will continue to closely monitor the workload and manpower situation of the IFSCs, and allocate more resources when necessary.

The estimated Government expenditure on the IFSCs operated by the SWD and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for 2018-19 is \$1.0134 billion. In 2017-18 (as at the end of December 2017), the average number of cases handled by each IFSC's social worker per month was 36.5.

(3) For cases involving separated/divorced families, if family members are living in different districts, the IFSCs' social workers will, with the consent of the individuals concerned, contact the social workers of other service units serving the same families. Social workers from the two service units will interact and coordinate with each other to conduct comprehensive assessment on the needs of the individuals concerned and their families, and with their best interests taken into consideration, arrange joint interviews, home visits or case conferences, and arrange parents and their children to join groups and programmes that are specifically designed for them, so as to provide appropriate services and assistance for separated/divorced families.

(4) and (5) To strengthen co-parenting support for divorced/divorcing/separated parents and their children, the SWD plans to set up five specialised one-stop co-parenting support centres to be operated by NGOs, one each in the five clusters across the territory (i.e. Hong Kong Island, Kowloon East, Kowloon West, New Territories East and New Territories West), in the fourth quarter of 2018 at the earliest, with services including co-parenting counselling, parenting co-ordination, structured co-parenting groups or programmes, child-focused counselling/groups or programmes, as well as children contact service. Meanwhile, the SWD is evaluating the effectiveness of the Pilot Project on Children Contact Service (the Pilot Project) operated by the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, and is planning to incorporate the Pilot Project into the new co-parenting support centres. As at mid-April 2018, a total of 105 cases had been served under the Pilot Project.

The above service projects are currently in the planning stage, with details to be finalised.

(6) The SWD has no plans to set up one-stop support centres for single-parent families. However, the SWD will continue to make efforts to provide comprehensive support services for single-parent and separated/divorced families through the IFSCs and the co-parenting support centres to be set up soon.

(7) As advised by the HAB, the Government is committed to enhancing the effectiveness of the system of collecting maintenance payments and enforcing maintenance orders. The measures taken so far include relaxing the requirement for the court to make an Attachment of Income Order, imposing interest or surcharge against defaulting maintenance payers as well as stepping up publicity and education work.

The Government will commission a consultancy study through the Family Council to examine various issues relating to marriage and divorce, including the proposal of setting up a maintenance board, with a view to facilitating the consideration of the way forward. The study is expected to commence in mid-2018.

While the consultancy study is underway, the Government will continue to review and implement suitable measures to facilitate the enforcement of maintenance orders. These measures include increasing the amount of monthly maintenance that may be exempted from the Director of Legal Aid's First Charge, streamlining the referral procedures for recovery of arrears of maintenance by legal aid applicants, as well as launching publicity and education programmes on an ongoing basis.