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Panel on Welfare Services

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 28 September 2009

Provision of subvented community services

Purpose

This paper summarises the deliberations of the Panel on Welfare Services (the Panel) on issues relating to the provision of subvented community services.

Background

2. Introduced in the 1970s, the Neighbourhood Level Community Development Projects (NLCDPs) were implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in transient communities where the provision of community facilities and welfare services was inadequate or non-existent. Such communities included temporary housing areas, squatter areas, cottage areas and boat squatters.

3. In December 1995, the then Executive Council decided not to extend NLCDPs to rural areas, new towns and public housing estates not affected by redevelopment. In addition, according to the recommendations made in the Director of Audit's Report No. 29 issued in October 1997, where the population of a project area fell below 3 000, the Administration should review whether there were still sufficient justifications for the project to continue.

4. In 2004, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) released a Policy Statement on Community Development setting out the Government's policy on community development and the general development direction of community development services. It was announced in the Statement that existing NLCDPs would be terminated when the project area was cleared or when the target population of their serving areas fell below 1 800. The resources released would be deployed into the operating expenditure envelope of the Home Affairs Department (HAD)

for financing other community projects having regard to community needs. These resources may be used by all districts for developing services to meet local needs, such as Neighbourhood Mutual Help Projects and Neighbourhood Child Care Service, having regard to the actual circumstances in the districts. According to the Administration, it has no plans to terminate the existing 17 NLCDPs.

5. According to the Administration, HAB is responsible for the policy on NLCDPs while the Social Welfare Department (SWD) monitors the service performance of the operating NGOs in accordance with the service requirements and performance standards stipulated in the Funding and Service Agreements (FSAs). Performance indicators stipulated in FSAs include overall service hours, service hours for implementing community projects, number of activities and attendees, and number of residents serviced, etc. SWD will conduct annual assessment on the performance of NGOs concerned and effectiveness of the services.

6. The project teams are led by social workers and the services provided can be categorised into three service types, viz. community projects (such as neighbourhood enhancement projects and environment improvement projects), community group activities (such as mutual-help groups and volunteer groups) and residents networking activities (such as visits to the elderly and residents' gatherings). The project teams will refer cases to other welfare organizations having regard to circumstances.

Deliberations of the Panel

7. The Panel held a meeting on 15 July 2008 to discuss the provision of subvented community services and received views from three deputations.

8. Members considered that NLCDPs could provide specific and target services to people living in transient communities and facilitate early identification of social problems at the district level. These members noted with concern that the number of NLCDPs was declining in the past few years, notwithstanding the Administration's advice that there had been no policy changes in the provision of community development services.

9. The Administration advised that it had no plan to terminate the remaining 17 NLCDPs. It was announced in the policy statement that the existing NLCDPs would be terminated when the project area was cleared or when the target population of their service areas fell below 1 800. Upon the termination of NLCDPs, the related financial resources released would be redeployed into the operating expenditure envelop of HAD. The resources might be used by all districts for developing services to meet local needs, such as the Neighbourhood

Child Care Service, having regard to the specific needs in the districts. The Administration further advised that upon termination of NLCDPs, the Administration would keep under constant review the effective deployment of the resources released.

10. Most members took the view that although the resources released upon the termination of NLCDPs might be deployed for the provision of community facilities and services, the objectives of these services were different from NLCDPs which sought to promote mutual help in solving community problems and build up social support networks. These members and deputations considered that the service demand for NLCDPs was particularly great in new and remote districts. They urged the Administration to provide new resources for launching NLCDPs in these districts.

11. Pointing out that the Forum on Community Development was a platform for discussing issues relating to the overall planning and management of resources for community development services among service operators, the Administration and related interested parties, members expressed concern that the Forum had not been convened since 2006. Since it was stated in the Policy Statement on Community Development that the Forum would meet on a quarterly basis, these members called on the Administration to provide justifications for not convening the Forum since 2006 and to re-convene the Forum.

12. The Administration advised that the Forum had not been convened in the past months because there had no policy change on community development.

13. Members expressed dissatisfaction at the Administration's response and agreed that the Panel should write to the Secretary for Home Affairs (SHA) conveying members' concerns about the policy on and resource allocation for community development services. In his reply, SHA assured members that the resources released from the closure of NLCDPs would continue to be allocated to HAD's expenditure envelope for providing community services, having regard to the actual circumstances in various districts. As for the reconvening of the NGO Forum on Community Development, since there had not been any change to the policy on NLCDPs and it had no intention to change the existing policy, the Administration did not see the need to convene the Forum at present.

Latest development

14. Consequent upon reports about an allegation that SHA had interfered in the operation of a social welfare organisation and the professional autonomy of social workers, the Panel will hold a special meeting on 28 September 2009 to discuss issues relating to the professional autonomy of social workers in the

provision of community services and the corporate governance of NGOs receiving subventions from the Government. Members may wish to note that Duty Roster Members under the Legislative Council Redress System met with a deputation on 15 July 2009 and convened a case conference with the Administration on 18 September 2009 regarding the abovementioned case.

Relevant papers

15. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's paper and minutes of meeting of the Panel on 15 July 2008 which are available on the Council's website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

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