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Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Housing

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the joint meeting on 13 April 2012

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper provides background information and gives an account of the discussions of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the WS Panel") on the support services for street sleepers.

Background

2. At present, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") has been subventing three non-governmental organizations ("NGOs"), namely the Salvation Army ("SA"), St James' Settlement ("SJ") and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association ("CCHA"), to each operate an Integrated Services Team for Street Sleepers ("IST"). A package of integrated services includes outreaching visits (including midnight outreaching), counselling and group activities, personal care such as bathing, hair-cutting, employment guidance, escorting, emergency fund, emergency shelter/hostel placement, as well as the service referrals, and is aimed at helping them to give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community. Besides, the Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs")/Integrated Services Centres of SWD and NGOs also provide outreaching, counselling, financial and accommodation assistance, referral for treatment and other support services to street sleepers.

3. SWD has set up a computerized Street Sleepers Registry ("SSR") to capture street sleepers' personal data and record the services they receive. Both SWD and services units of NGOs specialized in serving street

sleepers have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with SSR on a monthly basis; and de-register the case when it is confirmed that the street sleepers have given up street sleeping. According to the Administration, the number of registered street sleepers at the end of March 2011 was 414.

Deliberations by the WS Panel

Provision of services by ISTs

4. At its meeting on 13 April 2004, the WS Panel was briefed on the findings of the final report of the evaluative research conducted by the City University and SWD's plan to revamp its street sleeper services. The research team made the following recommendations on future service development for street sleepers –

- (a) an integrated approach, i.e. provision of a continuum of services including casework, outreaching, emergency and short-term accommodation, emergency funding, employment assistance, network re-building, aftercare etc. in helping street sleepers live off the street and be self-reliant;
- (b) aftercare service for accommodated street sleepers, at least for the initial six months, was essential to ensure that they could adjust satisfactorily to the new living environment, re-build their social network and to prevent relapse; and
- (c) NGOs should focus on direct service delivery while SWD should assume the role of service planning, co-ordination and monitoring.

5. According to the Administration, it agreed with the research team's recommendation that service integration should be both a strategy and direction to tackle the street sleeper problem. The Administration proposed to pool the resources of the individual subvented services programmes operated by SJS and SA and the three SWD's Street Sleepers Outreaching Teams¹ ("SSOTs") to facilitate revamping of three new ISTs, to be operated by SJS, SA and CCHA, to provide one-stop integrated services for street sleepers to cover the whole territory. Other subvented services or self-financing services such as street sleepers' temporary

¹ SWD's three SSOTs provided only casework and outreaching but not other support services (e.g. day relief centres, urban hostels, etc.) and these SSOTs had to rely on the provision of such services by the subvented sector.

shelters, day relief service, and short-term accommodation service operated by various NGOs would continue to be in existence to provide support to the three NGOs. On the other hand, IFSCs/Family Service Centres would continue to support street sleepers either through direct casework services/groups and programmes or networking with the NGOs operating street sleeper services for referral of services for street sleepers as appropriate. SWD would close its SSOTs but maintain the role of service planning, co-ordination and monitoring.

6. Members expressed support in principle for revamping street sleepers service. However, some members expressed concern about the resources for the three NGOs to operate the three new ISTs. The Administration advised that the resources would be pooled from the recurrent subventions for the subvented services including two day relief centres and two urban hostels for singletons which were no longer required, and from the savings resulting from the closure of the three SSOTs of SWD. The required subvention was worked out with each NGO concerned, taking into account the service components and essential staffing requirement.

7. Some deputations took the view that a longer period of aftercare service for accommodated street sleepers should be provided. The Administration explained that providing aftercare service to street sleepers for six months was only the minimum requirement as stipulated in the funding and service agreement with the NGOs concerned. It did not rule out the need for a longer period of time for aftercare service.

Support services for street sleepers

8. Noting a rise in the number of street sleepers since the last quarter of 2008, the WS Panel examined the support services for street sleepers at its meetings on 16 April 2009 and 9 May 2011, and received views from deputations on the difficulties faced by street sleepers.

Accommodation needs of street sleepers

9. Members called on the Administration to strengthen the support services for street sleepers which included, among others, re-opening the singleton hostels previously operated by the Home Affairs Department ("HAD"). Members generally took the view that the provision of singleton hostels at affordable charges would be the most desirable interim measure to assist the street sleepers, who were mostly unemployed and financially unstable, to live off the street.

10. The Administration advised that SWD had subvented NGOs to operate five urban hostels and two emergency shelters, providing a total of 202 places of short-term accommodation and counselling services. Apart from these government-subvented hostels and shelters, there were eight street sleeper or temporary shelters, operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis, which provided a total of 436 places of overnight or temporary accommodation for street sleepers and other needy persons. The Administration further advised members that to address the accommodation needs of street sleepers, an allocation of \$70,000 was included in the annual subvention for each of the three ISTs as emergency fund to cover eligible users' expenses such as payment of rent, rental deposit, other removal expenses and short-term living costs, etc. Street sleepers might be assisted with the emergency fund from ISTs to meet their imminent need, which could normally be disbursed within a short time, say a day.

11. In addition to the provision of subvented urban hostels and temporary shelters, members noted that CCHA (one of the existing ISTs), with the assistance of the Administration, had set up two self-financing hostels in 2009-2010. SWD would take the opportunity to consider enhancing the subvented emergency shelter service of CCHA. The Administration stressed that the hostels and shelters for street sleepers subvented by SWD were temporary accommodation, and the ultimate goal was to help the residents move to longer-term accommodation. For street sleepers who had genuine and pressing housing needs on social/medical ground but were unable to solve the problems themselves, SWD would recommend them to the Housing Department ("HD") for consideration of allocating public rental housing units under the compassionate rehousing arrangement.

12. In response to the proposal for re-opening the singleton hostels previously operated by HAD, the Administration explained that the Singleton Hostel Programme ("SHP") under HAD was specifically introduced in 1991 to offer rehousing arrangements to accommodate those displaced lodgers affected by the enactment of the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance (Cap. 447). As the number of singletons affected by the Ordinance had been significantly reduced, it was decided in 2004 that the small/medium-sized singleton hostels be gradually phased out. As at April 2009, there were two multi-storey purpose-built singleton hostels, namely the "Sunrise House" and the "High Street House" remaining in the programme.

13. At the meeting of the WS Panel on 9 May 2011, members agreed that the Panel should write to HAD requesting it to consider re-opening the

singleton hostels. In its reply, HAD advised that the phasing out programme in respect of SHP was completed in March 2009 and all the 26 premises had been returned to their respective owners. According to the Administration, SHP comprised two singleton hostels, namely the Sunrise House in Sham Shui Po and the High Street House in Sai Ying Pun, providing a total capacity of 580 bedspaces. Singletons who were under 60 years of age earning a monthly salary of not more than \$9,900 and currently living in an apartment with area less than 5.5m² for more than six months were eligible for applying for a place in the hostels under SHP. Compassionate cases referred by SWD or other NGOs were also accepted when there were vacancies in the hostels.

14. The Administration stressed that SHP was not and had never intended to be a housing or welfare scheme for street sleepers. For street sleepers with genuine and pressing housing and welfare need in general but were unable to solve the problems themselves, SWD and HD would provide assistance under their respective policy purview.

Financial assistance

15. Members noted with concern about an increasing number of Hong Kong residents who used to work in the Mainland had returned to Hong Kong due to loss of jobs amidst the financial tsunami. These Hong Kong permanent residents were not eligible for applying for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") immediately after their return as they could not satisfy the one-year-continuous-residence requirement under the CSSA Scheme, even though they were in genuine hardship. Some of them became street sleepers because of financial hardship. Members called on the Administration to enhance the employment assistance schemes and review the CSSA Scheme.

16. The Administration considered it necessary to maintain the residence requirement under the CSSA Scheme to provide a rational basis for the allocation of public resources. Where a CSSA applicant was in genuine need, the Director of Social Welfare might consider exercising discretion to waive the one-year-continuous-residence requirement having regard to individual circumstances. In the interim, street sleepers and other needy persons might be assisted with grants from the emergency funds and charitable trust funds through ISTs or IFSCs to tide over the short-term difficulties.

17. While rent allowance was payable to eligible CSSA recipients for meeting accommodation expenses, members noted with concern that as a

result of an upsurge in rentals, the maximum rate of the rent allowance ("MRA") was inadequate for street sleepers on CSSA to rent a cubicle in an old private building and live off the street.

18. The Administration advised that MRA was adjusted annually in accordance with the movement of the rent index, which was compiled by the Census and Statistics Department based on the movement of the Consumer Price Index (A) rent index for private housing. Notwithstanding that the Administration had no intention to change the adjustment mechanism for the time being, it would closely monitor the latest situation and propose adjustment to MRA as necessary.

Relevant papers

19. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
2 April 2012

Appendix

Relevant papers on support services for street sleepers

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Welfare Services	9 April 2001 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	10 June 2002 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	13 April 2004 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	16 April 2009 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	9 May 2011 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)1971/10-11(01)

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