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Panel on Welfare Services

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 14 November 2011

Short-term food assistance

Purpose

This paper summarizes the deliberations of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the Panel") on issues relating to the provision of short-term food assistance for individuals and families in need.

Background

2. Non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") and local organizations in the community have been providing temporary in-kind food assistance to assist individuals and families in need. The target service users of these organizations include individuals/families who are of low income or in poverty, street sleepers, single parent families, new arrivals, and individuals/families in need of emergency relief due to unexpected incidents. These organizations usually operate their services without Government subvention.

3. The Chief Executive ("CE") announced at the Question and Answer Session in July 2008 that an amount of \$100 million would be earmarked for the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") to work with NGOs to offer additional food assistance.

4. In his Policy Address 2011-2012, CE announced that the Government would seek the approval of the Finance Committee for an additional funding of \$100 million to continue and improve the short-term food assistance service projects, including providing more food varieties and fresh food.

Deliberations of the Panel

Measures to facilitate NGOs to provide food assistance for those in need

5. At its meeting on 12 June 2008, the Panel was briefed on the Government's support measures for the low-income group in face of rising food prices. Members were advised that NGOs which provided short-term food assistance usually operated their services without Government subvention, and SWD would provide appropriate assistance to these organizations. If these organizations had to identify premises for providing in-kind food assistance services, SWD would assist as appropriate. Relevant organizations might also apply to SWD for rent and rate subsidy for the provision of food assistance services provided they met the eligibility criteria and passed the financial and service assessment. According to the Administration, among the service units of SWD, 20 units (including 14 Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs")) had established partnership with the food banks operated by St. James' Settlement.

6. In the view of the Administration, there did not appear to be a lack of donations of food and other daily necessities from individuals, community groups and business organizations. SWD would refer interested donors to the relevant NGOs. The Administration was also discussing with the Hong Kong Hotels Association on how to make use of their food to serve the disadvantaged groups in the community. In addition, the NGOs concerned could partner with the business sector and apply for funding from the Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged. For example, the Fund had supported the food assistance services of the Kwun Tong Methodist Social Service and St. James' Settlement. SWD would explore the further expansion of the existing network of food banks to enhance timely provision of food assistance to the low-income group.

Measures to assist the low-income group in face of rising food prices

7. Deputations attending the Panel meeting on 12 June 2008 highlighted the financial difficulties encountered by the low-income group in face of rising food prices. Deputations suggested that the Administration should set up food banks to provide free meals or issue food coupons to low-income families, and provide meal allowance to primary and secondary school students from these families.

8. Expressing similar concerns raised by deputations, members took the view that the rapidly worsening inflation problem had affected adversely the livelihood of the low-income group. This would upset social harmony. Members called on the Administration to introduce immediate measures to alleviate the financial hardship faced by the low-income families (including those who were not on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA")), as some needy individuals and families were reluctant to apply for the CSSA Scheme due to various reasons.

9. The Administration responded that it had announced a number of specific initiatives in the 2008-2009 Budget to help relieve inflation pressure on the low-income group. These initiatives included the \$1,800 electricity charge subsidy for each residential account; rates exemption for the whole year; and payment of one month's rent for low-income families living in public rental housing units. Individuals and families in need might also seek assistance from IFSCs or Medical Social Service Units which would render appropriate assistance according to the circumstances and needs of individual cases, such as applying for charitable trust funds to relieve their financial hardship.

10. As for those who were on social security, one additional month of standard payment rates and allowance would be provided to the CSSA and Disability Allowance recipients respectively. Each Old Age Allowance recipient would be given a one-off grant of \$3,000. In addition, the CSSA standard payment rates were adjusted upwards by 4.4% ahead of the normal schedule in June 2008 so as to maintain the purchasing power of the payment. Moreover, CSSA children who were full-time students and had to take lunch away from home were provided with an additional monthly meal allowance of \$200.

Short-term food assistance service

Service coverage

11. Following CE's announcement in July 2008 about the provision of \$100 million to offer additional food assistance, the Panel was briefed on 10 November 2008 on the Administration's proposal to set up five service projects by NGOs over the territory to provide short-term food assistance to individuals and families in need. Of the total amount of \$100 million, \$60 million would be allocated to meet the operational expenses of the service projects (i.e. \$12 million for each project) including expenses for food and administration. The administration costs could not exceed 15% of the operational expenses allocated. Besides, if required by individual

operating NGOs, a maximum of \$2.5 million for each project would be provided for the one-off set up cost to cover expenses for fitting out of premises, purchase of food storage and processing equipment, transportation arrangement for food collection and delivery.

12. Pointing out that the areas served by each project were very extensive, members expressed concern that some potential service users could not access the food centres if they were living in remote areas. Moreover, the service users should not have to incur considerable transport costs to receive food assistance. The Administration advised that the underpinning philosophy of the proposal was that no one should be deprived of food because of a lack of means. The operating NGOs would establish partnership and district networks for food distribution in the respective project areas served. Provisions would be allocated to the operating NGOs for meeting the operating expenses of the service projects, including making arrangement for food delivery.

Target service users

13. While supporting the proposal to provide short-term food assistance to individuals and families in need, some members considered that the target recipients should be extended to needy elders who relied on OAA to make ends meet and newly arrived Mainland single mothers who had to rely on their children's CSSA for a living.

14. The Administration explained that target service users could broadly be categorized into two groups. The first group were individuals and families who had proven difficulties in coping with daily food expenditure, such as unemployed, low-income workers, new arrivals, street sleepers, and individuals or families encountering sudden changes and facing immediate financial hardship. The second group included those who had not benefited from the Government's relief measures announced earlier in 2008. It was envisaged that a minimum of 50 000 persons would benefit from the proposal. The Administration assured members that the operating NGOs would, in collaboration with the Government and other district organizations, proactively get in touch with needy individuals who had not benefited from the Government's relief measures, and publicize the food assistance initiative among this group, especially tenants of bedspace apartments, cubicle apartments and rooftop structures.

Scope of service

15. Members welcomed the proposal but noted with concern that the

provision of food assistance was mainly in the form of dry rations which would be less nutritious to the health of service users. The Administration advised that to meet the direct and special needs of service users, appropriate fresh/frozen food, hot meal coupons, baby food, baby formula, etc. might be provided as part of the six-week food assistance.

16. In addition to short-term food assistance, members urged the Administration to come up with long-term measures to address the financial difficulties encountered by the low-income group. Members considered that it would be more effective for the Administration to provide direct cash subsidy to those individuals and families who had not benefited from the Government's relief measures.

17. The Administration explained that the proposal aimed to offer additional food assistance. Under the proposed projects, service users would receive food assistance for a maximum of six weeks. Provision of further assistance after six weeks might be considered subject to the review of individual case merits. If individual service users had long-term welfare needs and would require service other than food assistance, the operating NGOs would make refer them to other service units for appropriate welfare service.

Latest development

18. The Administration will brief the Panel on 14 November 2011 on its proposal to seek the approval of the Finance Committee for additional funding to continue the short-term food assistance service and introduce improvement, including providing more food varieties and fresh food.

Relevant papers

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

**Relevant papers on
short-term food assistance**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	31 October 2007	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 101 - 105
Legislative Council	19 December 2007	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 69 - 73
Legislative Council	19 December 2007	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 85 - 89
Legislative Council	7 May 2008	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 7 - 19
Legislative Council	4 June 2008	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 32 - 42
Legislative Council	11 June 2008	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 123 - 193
Panel on Welfare Services	12 June 2008 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	10 November 2008 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes