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Subcommittee on Poverty

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 16 February 2016

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussion at meetings of the Council and its committees 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, St James' Settlement 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 give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community. Besides, the Integrated Family Service Centres/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. In 2014-2015, the number of

registered street sleepers and the numbers of cases of quitting street sleeping after the intervention of ISTs were 806 (as at January 2015) and 85 (as at December 2014) respectively.

Deliberations by Members

Number of street sleepers on SSR

4. Some Members expressed concern about the inaccuracy of the number of street sleepers recorded by SWD, which was much smaller than the number provided by some community organizations in the same period. Some other Members called on the Administration to streamline the procedures and review the criteria adopted by SWD for registration of street sleepers, so that the data collected would reflect accurately the magnitude of the problem of street sleeping and facilitate the Administration's planning of the work in addressing the street sleeping problem.

5. According to the Administration, SWD had been registering the number and recording the data of street sleepers through the computerized SSR as mentioned in paragraph 3 above. The Administration explained that the number of street sleepers recorded in SSR was indicative only and would fluctuate depending on a number of factors, such as economic conditions and the employment status of the street sleepers.

Accommodation needs of street sleepers

Provision of emergency shelters/hostel placements

6. Some Members had time and again called on the Administration to strengthen the support services for street sleepers which included, among others, re-launching the Singleton Hostel Programme ("SHP") which was phased out in 2009 and 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. The Panel on Welfare Services ("the Panel") wrote to HAD in May 2011 requesting it to consider re-opening the singleton hostels.

7. The Administration, however, explained that 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 26 small/medium-sized singleton hostels under SHP be gradually phased out. The phasing out programme was completed in March 2009. At present, there were two multi-storey purpose-built singleton hostels, namely the "Sunrise House" and the "High Street House" remaining in SHP, providing a total capacity of 580 bedspaces for eligible displaced lodgers aged below 60. 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 needs but were unable to solve the problems themselves, SWD and the Housing Department ("HD") would provide assistance under their respective policy purview.

8. The Administration further advised that SWD had subvented NGOs to operate five urban hostels for single persons and two emergency shelters, providing a total of 202 places of short-term accommodation and counselling services. The average utilization rate was 81.1% in 2012-2013. Apart from these government-subvented hostels and shelters, there were other NGOs operating seven hostels on a self-financing basis, which provided a total of 397 places of overnight or temporary accommodation for street sleepers and other needy persons.

9. Noting that the average utilization rate of existing hostels and emergency shelters operated by NGOs had not yet reached their full capacity, some Members enquired about the reasons why street sleepers were not willing to move into those hostels or shelters. The Administration advised that street sleeping was a complicated issue. While street sleeping was personal choice of many street sleepers, reasons for their doing so included "street sleeping was more convenient", "to save money", and "preferred street sleeping to living with others".

10. 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 HD for consideration of allocating public rental housing ("PRH") units under the Compassionate Rehousing ("CR") arrangement.

Provision of PRH

11. In response to some Members' enquiry about the number of successful and unsuccessful/refused applications of street sleepers for CR, the Administration advised that there were 19 successful applications of street sleepers for CR in 2012. However, SWD did not have records of unsuccessful/refused application. In the past, only a few applications of street sleepers for CR had been received. SWD would assess those applications on a case-by-case basis, and prudent use of public resources would be a factor of consideration as successful applications for PRH through CR would affect the chance of other applicants who were on the PRH waiting list.

12. Some Members enquired about the situation of street sleepers reverting to street sleeping after being allocated PRH units. The Administration advised that according to the social workers who were in touch with street sleepers, some street sleepers who were allocated with PRH units reverted to street sleeping owing to their difficulties in adapting to the new lifestyle and/or other personal factors. For instance, some street sleepers who were engaged in a number of casual jobs to support their own living would prefer to stay in the streets near to their workplaces. Some other street sleepers chose to revert to street sleeping in the original locations probably because of their personal problems (including alcoholism, drug abuse or psychiatric problems), which made them relatively difficult to adapt to the new living environment and establish new social support network. Besides, some street sleepers chose to revert to street sleeping as they had problems in getting along with their family members living under the same roof.

13. To address the housing problem of street sleepers, some Members urged the Administration to increase the supply of PRH and improve the points system¹ under the PRH Scheme. The Administration advised that it would have to uphold the principle of equitable distribution in PRH allocation between applications from ordinary families and those with special requests. Eligible applicants for PRH, including non-elderly one-person applicants, could apply for fast-track access to PRH under the Express Flat Allocation Scheme.

¹ According to the Administration, it was the policy of the Administration and the Hong Kong Housing Authority ("HA") to accord priority to general applicants (i.e. family and elderly one-person applicants) over non-elderly one-person applicants in the allocation of PRH flats. To this end, HA had introduced the Quota and Points System ("QPS") for non-elderly one-person applicants in September 2005. Under QPS, the relative priority of PRH flat allocation to applicants was determined by the points of applicants obtained under the points system. The points of applicants were determined by a series of factors, including the age of the applicants, whether the applicants were living in PRH, and the waiting time. The refined points system was implemented with effect from 1 February 2015. Refinements included awarding a one-off bonus of 60 points to applicants when they had reached the age of 45 to accord them with a higher priority over other younger applicants; and increasing the scale of age points from three to nine points per year of age increase at the time of application to reduce the incentive for early registration.

Financial and employment assistance for street sleepers

14. Members were informed that an allocation of \$90,000 (as at July 2013) 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. According to individual circumstances, social workers would refer the street sleepers in need to apply for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") or arrange for them to apply for charitable trust funds. To enhance the support for street sleepers, some Members called on the Administration to increase the annual allocation for emergency fund to \$150,000 for each ISTs. The Administration advised that SWD would take into account the utilization of the emergency fund and consider the need for further increase of the allocation.

15. While rent allowance was payable to eligible CSSA recipients for meeting accommodation expenses, some 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. 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.

16. Some Members were concerned that some street sleepers were facing the problem of not being able to provide prospective employers with prerequisite information such as address and telephone number, thereby hindering them from finding jobs. The Administration advised that street sleepers could use the addresses of the three ISTs and borrow from ISTs second-hand mobile phones for finding jobs. Some Members, however, considered such arrangement unworkable as using an IST's address as a job applicant's correspondence address would reveal the identity of the job applicant as a street sleeper who was receiving IST's assistance.

Formulation of policies on street sleepers

17. During the motion debate on the report of the delegation of the Subcommittee on Poverty ("Subcommittee") to study the experience of poverty alleviation in Taiwan and Japan at the Council meeting of 18 June

2014, some Members held the view that the Administration should make reference to the experience of Japan on the handling of street sleepers. The services provided for street sleepers by the Japanese Government included visiting them frequently; providing temporary shelters, health check-up, service need assessment and daily life guidance; offering accommodation for six months for street sleepers who were assessed to have capability and intention to work. The shelters provided were clean and tidy, with a separate room for each of them and a public canteen. With the aforesaid support, street sleepers would have a regular life pattern. For those who had left the shelters, the Japanese Government would continue to follow up their employment and living so as to improve their living conditions.

18. For the existing support measures for street sleepers in Hong Kong, some Members considered them piecemeal and ineffective in tackling street sleeping problem. These Members held the view that the Administration should formulate a holistic and comprehensive policy to balance the interests of both street sleepers and the residents affected by street sleeping, since it was impossible to eradicate street sleeping in the community. Failing this, the problem of street sleeping would become acute and street sleepers would be more marginalized. The Administration advised that individual government bureaux and departments played their specific roles to address the emergency needs of street sleepers and help them give up street sleeping and become self-reliant as far as possible.

19. At its meeting on 10 June 2013, the Panel passed a motion urging the Administration to adopt a humane and friendly attitude towards street sleepers instead of discriminating against them or even evicting them. The Panel called on the Administration to immediately review and raise the maximum level of rent allowance under the CSSA Scheme, as well as increase the number of low-cost singleton hostels and supply of PRH, with a view to enabling PRH allocation to single persons within three years. The Administration was also requested to formulate a policy on street sleepers.

Latest development

20. According to media reports dated 26 January 2016, some members of the public raised concern about the recent cleansing operations conducted in cold weather by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department to maintain environmental hygiene at several pedestrian subways. The aforesaid operations had wetted the beddings of some street sleepers living in the pedestrian subways concerned. In response to the issue, some Members called on the Administration to be more considerate

about the needs of street sleepers and immediately suspend the cleansing operations in cold weather. According to the Administration, the departments concerned would address the issue. At the Subcommittee's request, the Administration will give a briefing on its support for street sleepers at the Subcommittee meeting on 16 February 2016.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
12 February 2016

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 |
| Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Housing | 13 April 2012 (Item II) | Agenda Minutes |
| Panel on Welfare Services | 10 June 2013 (Item IV) | Agenda Minutes |
| Panel on Home Affairs Services and Panel on Welfare Services | 22 July 2013 (Item II) | Agenda Minutes |
| Legislative Council | 18 June 2014 | Official Record of Proceeding Pages 6-28 |
| Legislative Council | 18 March 2015 | Official Record of Proceeding Pages 38-50 |
| Finance Committee | 2 April 2015 | Administration's replies to members' written questions in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2015-2016 Pages 503-504, 673-675 |

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| Legislative Council | 15 April 2015 | Official Record of Proceeding Pages 96-100 |
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