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Panel on Home Affairs and Panel on Welfare Services

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the joint meeting on 22 July 2013

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the discussions of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the WS Panel") on the support services for street sleepers and highlights the concerns of members of the WS Panel and the Panel on Home Affairs ("the HA Panel") about the impact of the greening works commissioned by the Yau Tsim Mong District Council ("YTMD") on the street sleepers.

Background

2. Since 2004, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") has been subventing three non-governmental organizations ("NGOs"), namely the Salvation Army ("SA"), St James' Settlement ("SJS") and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association ("CCHA"), to each operate an Integrated Services Team for Street Sleepers ("IST") to provide one-stop integrated support services for street sleepers, including day and late-night outreaching visits, emergency shelter and short-term hostel placement, counselling, employment guidance, personal care (such as bathing, hair-cutting and meal service), emergency relief fund, aftercare service and service referrals, etc. According to the Administration, the support services provided by IST aim to address the emergency needs of street sleepers and to enhance their work motivation and skills so as to help them give up street sleeping and become self-reliant. In addition, the Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSCs")/Integrated Services Centres operated by SWD and NGOs also provide outreaching, counselling, financial and

accommodation assistance, referrals for treatments 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 register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with SSR on a monthly basis, and de-register cases when it is confirmed that the street sleepers have given up street sleeping. According to the Administration, as at 30 April 2013, the number of registered street sleepers was 642.

Deliberations by the WS Panel

4. Issues relating to support for street sleepers were discussed at a number of meetings of the WS Panel. The deliberations and concerns of members are summarized below.

Provision of services by ISTs

5. 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 of Hong Kong 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.

6. 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 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.

7. Members expressed support in principle for revamping street sleepers service. However, some members expressed concern about the adequacy of 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.

8. 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

9. Noting with concern 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, 9 May 2011, 13 April 2012 and 10 June 2013. The Panel also received views from deputations on the difficulties faced by street sleepers.

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.

Accommodation needs of street sleepers

10. 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.

11. 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. The average utilization rate was 81.1% in 2012-2013. Apart from these government-subvented hostels and temporary shelters, there were seven hostels operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis in 2013, providing a total of 397 places of overnight or temporary accommodation for street sleepers and other needy persons. At the meeting of the WS Panel on 9 May 2011, members were advised 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. Members had called on the Administration to increase the annual allocation for emergency fund from \$70,000 to \$150,000 for each of ISTs to cover eligible applicants' expenses. At the meeting of the WS Panel on 10 June 2013, members noted that the annual allocation for emergency fund for each of the three ISTs had been increased to \$90,000.

12. 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. At the joint meeting of the WS Panel and the Panel on Housing on 13 April 2012, members called on the Administration to consider deputations' suggestion that a specific quota should be set aside for middle-aged singletons under the points system for non-elderly one-person PRH allocation. 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, adding that eligible applicants for PRH, including non-elderly one-person applicants, could apply for fast-track access to PRH under the Express Flat Allocation Scheme.

13. 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.

14. 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.

15. 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

16. 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.

17. 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.

18. 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.

19. 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.

Recent development

20. In May 2013, the WS Panel and the HA Panel received a referral from the Public Complaints Office of the Legislative Council ("LegCo")

requesting the two Panels to follow up issues relating to the problems faced by street sleepers who were not on CSSA. Subsequently, the WS Panel held a meeting on 10 June 2013 to discuss and receive deputations' views on the subject of support for street sleepers who were not on CSSA, and members of the HA Panel were invited to join the discussion. Members attending the meeting generally expressed concern about the lack of a comprehensive policy on street sleeping and the fragmented measures implemented by various government departments to assist the street sleepers. Concern was also raised about the impact of the greening works to be conducted underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, which was commissioned by YTMDC, on the street sleepers currently living in the area. The WS Panel passed a motion at the meeting expressing regret at the works to evict all the street sleepers by fencing off the area under the Ferry Street Flyover, and requesting that the relevant works be stopped immediately. The relevant authorities were also urged to immediately help the street sleepers concerned to move into public rental housing.

21. With regard to the greening works underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, the Administration advised the HA Panel on 5 July 2013 that it was a district minor works ("DMW") project under YTMDC which was first raised at the meeting of the District Facilities and Management Committee ("DFMC") of YTMDC in March 2011 and endorsed by DFMC in May 2012 with the aims of greening the area and improving the environment. The Yau Tsim Mong District Office ("YTMDO") had consulted residents' organizations, schools, merchants' association nearby and the Area Committee concerned, most of which had expressed support for the proposed works. YTMDC had requested SWD to provide counselling and support services to those street sleepers who might be affected by the project. YTMDO, the Lands Department and SWD had a meeting with the representatives for the street sleepers and the Society for Community Organization on 2 May 2013 to understand the accommodation needs of the street sleepers concerned and offer assistance to them. According to the Administration, eight street sleepers under the Ferry Street Flyover had quitted street sleeping through the assistance by the IST operated by SA, and support services would continue to be provided to individual street sleepers according to their needs. The Administration also stressed that when planning DMW projects, YTMDC and YTMDO would continue to listen to and take into consideration the views of different stakeholders and local personalities.

22. At the meeting between LegCo Members and Eastern District Council members on 27 June 2013, concern was expressed about the increase in the number of street sleepers. LegCo Members attending the

meeting agreed to refer the matter to the WS Panel for consideration and follow-up on issues relating to the formulation of a long-term policy by the Government to address the needs of street sleepers and enhance the assistance for them.

23. The HA Panel and the WS Panel will hold a joint meeting on 22 July 2013 to discuss with the Administration the concerted efforts to assist street sleepers.

Relevant papers

24. A list of the relevant papers on LegCo's website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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**Relevant papers on
support services for street sleepers**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
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
Panel on Home Affairs	---	Administration's response on matters relating to street sleepers concerning home affairs