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Panel on Home Affairs and Panel on Welfare Services

Minutes of joint meeting
held on Monday, 22 July 2013, at 4:30 pm
in Conference Room 3 of the Legislative Council Complex

Members present : Members of the Panel on Home Affairs

Hon MA Fung-kwok, SBS, JP (Chairman)
Dr Hon Kenneth CHAN Ka-lok (Deputy Chairman)
Hon WONG Kwok-hing, BBS, MH
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon IP Kwok-him, GBS, JP
Hon Claudia MO
Hon Steven HO Chun-yin
* Hon Frankie YICK Chi-ming
Hon WU Chi-wai, MH
Hon YIU Si-wing
* Hon CHAN Chi-chuen
* Dr Hon Helena WONG Pik-wan
Hon IP Kin-yuen
Dr Hon CHIANG Lai-wan, JP
Hon Tony TSE Wai-chuen

Members of the Panel on Welfare Services

Hon CHAN Yuen-han, SBS, JP (Chairman)
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Dr Hon LEUNG Ka-lau
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung
Hon Alice MAK Mei-kuen, JP
Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung
Hon POON Siu-ping, BBS, MH

Member attending : Hon James TO Kun-sun

Members absent : Members of the Panel on Home Affairs

Hon Starry LEE Wai-king, JP

Dr Hon LAM Tai-fai, SBS, JP

^ Hon CHEUNG Kwok-che

* Hon LEUNG Che-cheung, BBS, MH, JP

Hon Christopher CHUNG Shu-kun, BBS, MH, JP

Members of the Panel on Welfare Services

Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung

Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, SBS, JP

Hon Ronny TONG Ka-wah, SC

Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC

Hon CHAN Han-pan

Hon TANG Ka-piu

(^ Also Deputy Chairman of the Panel on Welfare Services)

(* Also members of the Panel on Welfare Services)

Public Officers attending : Item II

Mr FUNG Man-chung

Assistant Director (Family and Child Welfare)

Social Welfare Department

Mr Eric K S HUI, JP

Assistant Director (2)

Home Affairs Department

Ms Betty HO, JP

District Officer (Yau Tsim Mong)

Home Affairs Department

Clerk in attendance : Ms Alice LEUNG
Chief Council Secretary (2) 2

Staff in attendance : Miss Josephine SO
Senior Council Secretary (2) 2

Miss Jasmine TAM
Council Secretary (2) 2

Miss Emma CHEUNG
Legislative Assistant (2) 2

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I. Election of Chairman

Mr MA Fung-kwok, Chairman of the Panel on Home Affairs, was elected Chairman of the joint meeting.

II. Concerted efforts to assist street sleepers

(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1631/12-13(01) to (04), CB(2)1275/12-13(05), CB(2)1445/12-13(02) and CB(2)1551/12-13(01))

2. At the invitation of the Chairman, Assistant Director (Family and Child Welfare) of Social Welfare Department ("AD/SWD") and District Officer (Yau Tsim Mong) ("DO/YTM") briefed Members on the Administration's support services for street sleepers and the assistance rendered to street sleepers staying underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, as set out in the Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)1631/12-13(01)).

3. The Chairman informed Members that written submissions from the Society for Community Organization ("SOCO") and the Owner Committee of Block 1 to Block 4 of Prosperous Garden had been issued vide LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1631/12-13(03) and (04) respectively on 19 July 2013.

Government's policy to assist street sleepers

4. Miss CHAN Yuen-han said that when the Panel on Welfare Services discussed the item "Support for street sleepers who are not on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance" at its meeting on 10 June 2013, Members were generally of the view that the Administration should formulate a holistic and comprehensive policy and devise more effective measures to tackle the problem of street sleeping from different policy perspectives. Stressing that the case involving street sleepers staying underneath the Ferry Street Flyover was a manifestation of problems which existed in many districts, she enquired about the Administration's work progress in the formulation of policy to address street sleeping.

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5. AD/SWD responded that while the provision of assistance to street sleepers was a concerted effort of different government departments, SWD had all along been providing integrated services for street sleepers through the Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers ("ISTs") operated by three subvented non-governmental organizations ("NGOs"). Such services included day and late-night outreaching visits, emergency shelter/short-term hostel placement, counselling, employment guidance, personal care, emergency relief fund to cover various expenses (e.g. short-term payment of rent and living costs, rental deposit, other removal expenses, etc.), aftercare service and service referrals, etc. The comprehensive services provided by ISTs aimed to address the emergency needs of street sleepers and help them give up street sleeping and become self-reliant as far as possible. AD/SWD further said that any individuals (including street sleepers) who had genuine and pressing housing needs but were unable to solve the problems themselves might approach the Integrated Family Service Centres run by SWD or NGOs. Based on the specific circumstances and needs of each individual case, appropriate assistance would be provided to the persons concerned, including the provision of short-term financial assistance, arranging for them to stay in hostels run by NGOs, and referring cases eligible for "compassionate rehousing" to the Housing Department ("HD") for consideration of allocation of public rental housing ("PRH") units, etc.

6. Assistant Director (2) of Home Affairs Department ("AD(2)/HAD") also said that individual bureaux and departments played their specific roles to assist street sleepers, with a view to helping them give up street sleeping as early as possible. In respect of cases concerning street sleepers in the districts, if necessary, HAD's District Offices might assist the work of other government departments, including SWD, in the public consultation process.

7. Dr Kenneth CHAN and Mr YIU Si-wing shared similar concern about the accuracy of the data concerning the number of street sleepers as recorded by SWD. Mr YIU said that according to information provided by some community organizations, the number of street sleepers as of October 2012 was 1 500 which was much higher than that provided by the Administration in its paper. He expressed concern about the adequacy of support services currently provided for street sleepers.

8. AD/SWD responded that SWD had been registering the number and recording the data of street sleepers through the computerized Street Sleepers Registry ("SSR") which captured street sleepers' personal data and service records. At present, both SWD and services units of NGOs specialized in serving street sleepers registered with SSR newly confirmed street sleeper cases and their personal information on a monthly basis. Apart from registering new cases, the service units also de-registered cases upon

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confirmation of cessation of street sleeping by street sleepers for the sake of data accuracy in SSR. According to SSR, the number of registered street sleepers as at 30 April 2013 was 642. Although the figure at the end of June 2013 recorded a slight increase, standing at 648, it was indicative only and would fluctuate depending on a number of factors, such as economic conditions and the employment status of the street sleepers. AD/SWD further said that the increase was not caused by registration of new cases, but due to the re-registration of old cases where the street sleepers concerned had once quitted street sleeping.

9. Expressing concern about the increase of street sleepers, Dr Kenneth CHAN considered the existing measures adopted by the Administration for tackling street sleeping ineffective. Dr CHAN, Dr Fernando CHEUNG, Dr Helena WONG, Mr WU Chi-wai, Mr POON Siu-ping and Mr IP Kwok-him supported that the Administration should formulate a comprehensive policy on street sleeping which would address both the interests of street sleepers and the residents affected by the problems associated with street sleeping. Dr CHEUNG, Dr WONG and Mr WU hoped that in the process of policy formulation, the Administration would adopt a humane and friendly attitude towards street sleepers instead of discriminating against them or even evicting them.

10. Dr Fernando CHEUNG expressed concern over the existing procedure and criteria adopted by SWD for registration of street sleepers. He hoped that the Government would review the criteria and streamline the procedures, so that the data collected would reflect the magnitude of the problem of street sleeping accurately and facilitate the Administration's planning of the work in addressing the problem.

Support services for street sleepers

11. Dr CHIANG Lai-wan said that the problem of street sleeping was also found in other districts such as Sham Shui Po and Kowloon City. Noting that the average utilization rate of existing hostels and temporary shelters operated by NGOs had yet reached their full capacity, she enquired about the reasons why street sleepers were not willing to move into those hostels or shelters and give up street sleeping.

12. AD/SWD responded that street sleeping was a complicated issue. While it was understood that street sleeping was the personal choice of many street sleepers, reasons provided by them included "street sleeping was more convenient", "to save money", and "preferred street sleeping to living with others". AD/SWD advised that to address the emergency and short-term accommodation needs of street sleepers, SWD subvented NGOs to operate five urban hostels and two emergency shelters, providing a total of 202

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accommodation places. In 2012-2013, the average utilization rate of these hostels and shelters was 81.1%. As explained earlier, the Government would continue to assist street sleepers through ISTs. Regarding mental health support services, SWD had subvented NGOs to set up the Integrated Community Centres for Mental Wellness ("ICCMWs") across the territory since October 2010 to provide community mental health support services for those in need and residents living in the serving districts. To strengthen the collaboration of ICCMWs with other service units and facilitate the effective delivery of services, SWD and the stakeholders concerned had jointly drawn up relevant referral procedures and collaboration guidelines. Social workers of ISTs could refer their cases to ICCMWs in the respective districts. Where necessary, ICCMWs could refer their cases through community psychiatric services of the respective clusters under the Hospital Authority ("HA") to the psychiatric specialist out-patient clinics under HA for further follow-up and treatment.

13. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung considered that the provision of singleton hostel places at affordable charges in districts easily accessible by street sleepers would be the most desirable interim measure to assist the street sleepers to live off the street. He 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 HAD.

14. AD(2)/HAD explained that SHP was specifically launched by HAD to tie in with the introduction of the licensing regime under the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance (Cap.447) ("BAO"). The objective of SHP was to provide short-term accommodation for those bedspace lodgers affected by the implementation of BAO through services provided by NGOs. When SHP was introduced in 1991, there were some 200 bedspace apartments. In 2004, there were only 34 bedspace apartments licensed under BAO. As the number of lodgers affected by BAO had been significantly reduced, it was decided in 2004 that the 26 small to medium-sized hostels being operated by the Agency for Volunteer Service be gradually phased out within four years starting from 2005. The phasing out programme was smoothly completed in March 2009, and all the 26 premises had been returned to their owners including the Hong Kong Housing Society. AD(2)/HAD stressed that SHP was not and had never been 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 HD would provide assistance under their respective policies.

15. Mr WU Chi-wai said that to enable more focused discussion on whether the existing support offered by the Government on various fronts to street sleepers was adequate and whether further assistance was required, it

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was necessary for Members to be provided with more detailed information about the status of the 648 registered street sleepers on SSR maintained by SWD and their reasons for street sleeping. He requested the Administration to provide the said information after the meeting. AD/SWD said that for the sake of deploying resources for the provision of services to street sleepers, SWD had conducted analyses on the profile of registered street sleepers on SSR.

16. Mr IP Kwok-him said that low-income singletons and street sleepers were different vulnerable groups whose needs and circumstances were not the same. In his view, the focus of the support services for street sleepers should be more on counselling, personal care, as well as encouraging and facilitating their re-integration into the community. In dealing with problems associated with street sleeping, members of District Councils ("DCs") should take into account the views of different stakeholders and balance appropriately their interests. As regards the greening works initiated by the Yau Tsim Mong District Council ("YTMD") at the Ferry Street Flyover, he believed that the purpose of the works was to respond to local residents' requests for a safe and comfortable living environment.

17. Echoing the view of Mr IP Kwok-him, Mr TAM Yiu-chung said that as the Yau Tsim Mong District Office ("YTMDO") had already consulted the resident organizations, schools and trade associations in the vicinity, as well as the concerned Area Committee on the proposed greening works project underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, it was not appropriate for Members to demand for the shelving of the project. Mr TAM and Miss CHAN Yuen-han shared the view that street sleeping was a social problem which had to be tackled from various fronts, with the concerted efforts of relevant government departments.

18. Mr Tony TSE sought information on the number of street sleepers applying for "compassionate rehousing" through SWD and the number of successful applications with PRH allocated to street sleepers under "compassionate rehousing" thus far.

19. In response, AD/SWD advised that -

- (a) "compassionate rehousing" was not confined to street sleepers. Instead, it aimed at helping those who had genuine, imminent and long-term housing problem which could not be resolved by their own means. Front-line staff of SWD and concerned NGOs would assess the situation of the applicants and recommend them to HD for consideration of allocating PRH units should they satisfy the eligibility criteria for "compassionate rehousing";

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- (b) the proposed allocation for "compassionate rehousing" were 2 000 PRH units per year. However, subject to the availability of resources, HD would process additional cases recommended by SWD on a need basis. In the last two years, the total number of PRH units allocated under "compassionate rehousing" was around 4 000; and
- (c) it should be noted that for various reasons, street sleepers left their family to sleep on streets. Some of them could not be recommended for consideration of allocation of PRH since their family members, with whom the street sleepers did not wish to live, were already allocated PRH. In the last two years, there were a total of 20 successful applications of street sleepers for "compassionate rehousing".

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20. Mr Tony TSE requested the Administration to provide after the meeting written information on the utilization rates of hostels operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis as referred to in paragraph 12.

Assistance for street sleepers staying underneath the Ferry Street Flyover

21. In response to Dr Kenneth CHAN's and Mr IP Kwok-him's enquiries about the assistance rendered to street sleepers staying and affected by the greening works underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, AD/SWD and DO/YTM advised that -

- (a) YTMDC understood that the proposed greening works project might affect the street sleepers staying underneath the flyover. As a matter of fact, YTMDC had always been concerned about their conditions and urged relevant departments to provide them with the necessary services and support;
- (b) in view of the grave concerns of Members and the public about the impact of the greening works on street sleepers in the area, YTMDO, the Lands Department and SWD met with representatives of the street sleepers and SOCO on 2 May 2013 to better understand the accommodation needs of the street sleepers there. Separately, some YTMDC members also met with representatives of the street sleepers and SOCO on 21 June 2013 to listen to their concerns and requests. YTMDC and relevant departments would continue to communicate with local personalities in order to better respond to community needs;
- (c) through IST of the Salvation Army, SWD had also arranged a number of outreaching visits to the concerned area to provide

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counselling services to the street sleepers and offer information on accommodation options, with a view to persuading and helping them to quit street sleeping. It was understood that eight street sleepers staying under the Ferry Street Flyover had already successfully quitted street sleeping recently through the assistance of the Salvation Army. The latter would continue to provide support services to the remaining six street sleepers, including five from ethnic minority groups (mainly Nepalese) and one from local community, according to their needs to ensure that adequate assistance was provided for them; and

- (d) to further strengthen the assistance to the street sleepers in the YTM district, YTMDO and SWD would continue to liaise with NGOs in the district to specially arrange their social workers to visit the street sleepers and give advice on the accommodation options based on individual needs of the street sleepers.

22. Responding to Mr YIU Si-wing's enquiry, AD/SWD advised that according to SWD's records, among the street sleepers in Hong Kong, approximately 60% of them were receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA").

23. Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that he had visited the street sleepers staying underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, and expressed regret at YTMDC's greening works in the area as it was an attempt to evict the street sleepers there. He was dissatisfied that the Government adopted an unfriendly approach in the matter, and asked about the Administration's efforts in ensuring the provision of adequate assistance for those street sleepers affected by the works.

24. AD/SWD responded that SWD had all along been committed to providing comprehensive services to street sleepers. Apart from providing subvention to three NGOs for each to operate an IST to provide one-stop services for street sleepers, SWD had also set up ICCMWs across the territory to provide community mental health support services for street sleepers in need and residents living in the serving districts. While the ultimate aim was to help street sleepers give up street sleeping and become self-reliant as far as possible, SWD would adopt a personalized approach of counselling and persuasion to encourage street sleepers to make use of the wide range of services available to them.

25. DO/YTM added that the greening works underneath the Ferry Street Flyover was a District Minor Works project initiated by YTMDC. The proposal was raised by the YTMDC District Facilities Management Committee with a view to greening the area and improving the environment,

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which was not intended as a means to evict street sleepers. She stressed that the poor air quality, the noise pollution problem and the traffic conditions in the area had made it a place not suitable for habitation.

26. Dr Fernando CHEUNG said that there were complaints from deputations that the works undertaken by the government departments such as greening works, street cleaning and pest control were targeted at evicting street sleepers. DO/YTM responded that various government departments including the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD") were involved in maintaining the cityscape and street cleanliness. The works carried out by FEHD and the patrolling by the Police in the area of the Ferry Street Flyover were not intended to target specifically at street sleepers staying there. Recognizing that the street sleepers might be affected by the street cleansing operations carried out by FEHD, FEHD would post notice in the area prior to operations in future.

27. Dr Helena WONG enquired whether the problem of drug abuse prevailed among the street sleepers staying underneath the Ferry Street Flyover. AD/SWD responded that according to data captured by SSR, as at the end of June 2013, about 25% of registered street sleepers in Hong Kong admitted that they had abused drug. Concerning the case involving 16 street sleepers underneath the flyover, one left the area for admission to the Drug Addiction Treatment Centre, and three of the remaining six street sleepers who continued to stay in the area admitted that they had drug abuse habit.

28. In response to Mr POON Siu-ping's enquiry, AD/SWD advised that social workers of IST of the Salvation Army had made a total of 16 outreaching visits to the concerned area between May and July 2013, during which two street sleepers among the 16 who had been staying underneath the flyover were found to have left the area themselves. These two street sleepers were reported as CSSA recipients who declined the service offered by IST. Since they had not made their presence in the area again, they were recorded and classified as "leaving the area themselves" in SSR.

29. The Chairman said that he had joined some Members to visit the street sleepers underneath the Ferry Street Flyover. According to his understanding, most of the street sleepers there had difficulty in finding jobs and affording the surging rents of private flats. They were left with no choice but to sleep on streets. This notwithstanding, he shared the view that the area concerned was indeed not a place suitable for living. He considered that the most effective measures to solve the problem at root were to help the unemployed street sleepers to join the labour force and to provide them with rent subsidy.

30. In response, DO/YTM advised that in the case under discussion, for the Nepalese street sleepers affected by the greening works, assistance was

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provided through members of their own community who shared similar ethnic background. In reaching out to the street sleepers concerned, the latter would, apart from understanding the accommodation needs of the street sleepers, arrange job referrals for them if so required. Citing a specific case as an example, DO/YTM said that assistance had been rendered to a few Nepalese street sleepers to rent a shared room so that they could share out the rental deposit and the monthly rent. She assured Members that every endeavour would be made to help street sleepers live off street.

31. In reply to Mr IP Kwok-him's enquiry about the implementation timetable for the greening works project underneath the Ferry Street Flyover, DO/YTM advised that subject to the Government's further assistance to the remaining six street sleepers in the area, it was the plan of YTMDC to commence the greening works before the end of the summer in 2013.

Motion proposed by Dr Fernando CHEUNG

32. Dr Fernando CHEUNG reiterated his view that street sleeping was a complicated issue, the solving of which required the formulation of a holistic and comprehensive policy and the enhancement of support services on various fronts. He intended to move a motion on the matter.

33. The Chairman advised that as there was insufficient quorum, the motion proposed by Dr Fernando CHEUNG could not be dealt with. In summing up, the Chairman requested the Administration to take note of Members' views and concerns expressed at the meeting on the formulation of policy to assist street sleepers.

34. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 6:02 pm.