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Panel on Welfare Services

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 21 May 2013

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 ("FC") 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. The relevant funding proposal was approved by FC in December 2011.

Deliberations of the Panel

Accessibility of service points

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. When the Panel was briefed on the Administration's proposal to seek additional funding for the continuation and enhancement of the short-term food assistance service at its meeting on 14 November 2011, members expressed concern about the distribution of the 413 service points. In their view, the Administration should step up the publicity on the service, as well as provide more food choices and service points which were accessible to people in need. Furthermore, collaboration with small local business operators and district councillors should be strengthened so as to expand the distribution network.

8. The Administration explained that the 413 service points included partnership with NGOs, community organizations, schools, district councillors' offices, government departments, etc. Local organizations

were welcomed to partner with the service operators. To better serve those users in remote areas, the five service operators had been providing food delivery service to those who lived in remote areas and therefore had difficulty in collecting the food items. Publicity of the service would be continued through various channels. The service operators would continue to collaborate with local business operators to provide fresh food to service users.

Adequacy of additional \$100 million injection of funds

9. Noting with concern that the number of service users had been increasing steadily, members were concerned about the adequacy of the injection of an additional \$100 million to meet the rising service demand.

10. According to the Administration, as at September 2011, the service had a remaining balance of \$36.5 million which might only last until the beginning of 2012. It was expected that the allocation of an additional \$100 million could finance the enhanced service to the end of 2013. Furthermore, as announced in the 2011-2012 Policy Address, additional resources would be provided to continue and improve the service as needed.

Target service users

11. 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 the Old Age Allowance ("OAA") to make ends meet and newly arrived single mothers who had to rely on their children's Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") payments for a living.

12. The Administration explained that target service users could broadly be categorized into two groups. The first group was individuals and families who had proven difficulties in coping with daily food expenditure, such as the 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.

Service duration

13. Some members were of the view that the service duration of six weeks, even with a further extension of six weeks, would not be sufficient for those service users who had long-term needs, particularly the elderly who relied on OAA for their living. They suggested that the elderly should have a waiver of the service duration requirement.

14. The Administration explained that 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 required services other than food assistance, the operating NGOs would refer them to other mainstream welfare services as appropriate.

Scope of service

15. Members noted with concern that the provision of food assistance was mainly in the form of dry rations which were less nutritious to the health of service users. They considered that, instead of providing dry rations, the Administration should consider providing hot meals, which could be done through kitchens or canteen service operated by NGOs or giving coupons to service users who could redeem hot meals at designated cooked food centres.

16. The Administration advised that to meet the direct and special needs of service users, appropriate fresh or frozen food, hot meal coupons, baby food, baby formula, etc. might be provided as part of the six-week food assistance. Further expansion of hot meal services by NGOs would also be subject to various considerations in operating kitchen and canteen service. Nevertheless, the Administration had all along encouraged and would continue to encourage NGOs to collaborate with the business sector to provide hot meal services. According to the Administration, service enhancement measures had been implemented since late October 2011, which included: (a) providing service users, in particular children, with fresh and nutritious food on a more regular basis; and (b) allowing service operators to give service users food or hot meal coupons which could be redeemed at designated food stalls, supermarkets and restaurants.

17. Members were gravely concerned that some service users were newly arrived single parents who had to rely on the CSSA payments of

their children as they were not eligible for CSSA. In members' view, the Administration should formulate concrete measures to tackle the core problems encountered by specific groups of service users. Some members were of the view that the operating NGOs should identify the genuine needs of service users and provide them with appropriate assistance, with a view to helping them become self-reliant in the long run.

18. 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. To enhance the support for low-income earners, some members suggested that a low-income supplement should be introduced.

19. The Administration advised that the service statistics showed that 40% of the service users were low-income workers, 20% were the unemployed, 10% were new arrivals and 10% were those who had not benefited from other relief measures. By the end of October 2011, a total of 9 465 CSSA recipients had received the service. Given that the food assistance service aimed to provide a short-term support for individuals and families in need, the Administration would refer service users who had other welfare and financial needs to the appropriate service units, for example, Integrated Family Service Centres or Social Security Field Units.

Latest development

20. The Administration will brief the Panel on 21 May 2013 on its proposal to seek FC's approval for additional funding to carry out further service enhancement and extend the short-term food assistance service.

Relevant papers

21. 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
Panel on Welfare Services	14 November 2011 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes

Finance Committee	16 December 2011	Minutes FCR(2011-12)60
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