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Panel on Welfare Services

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 9 April 2018**

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper summarizes discussions at meetings of the Council and its committees on the support services for street sleepers.

Background

2. At present, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") subvents three non-governmental organizations ("NGOs"), namely the Salvation Army, St James' Settlement and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association, to each operate an Integrated Services Team for Street Sleepers ("IST"). The integrated services, which aim at helping street sleepers give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community, include outreaching visits (including midnight outreaching), counselling and group activities, personal care (e.g. bathing and hair-cutting), employment guidance, escorting, emergency relief fund ("ERF"), emergency shelter/hostel placement and service referral. 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 for 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 cases when it is confirmed that the

street sleepers have given up street sleeping. As at end-December 2016, the number of registered street sleepers and the number of cases of quitting street sleeping after the intervention of ISTs were 908 and 140 respectively.

Members' deliberations

Statistics on street sleepers and homeless people

4. Some Members expressed concern that the number of homeless people recorded by SWD under SSR was much smaller than that 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 problem. The Administration explained that SSR covered street sleepers who were confirmed to be street sleeping while the surveys conducted by some community groups had included homeless people who were street sleeping, living temporarily in hostels for street sleepers or urban hostels for single persons, temporarily staying in fast food restaurants which were operated 24 hours a day, etc. As such, there was a difference in the criteria of the two sets of numbers.

Accommodation needs of street sleepers

Provision of temporary cold shelters during cold days

5. Some Members expressed concern about the undesirable arrangement of temporary cold shelters under the Home Affairs Department ("HAD") during cold days, and inadequate provision of hot meals therein. According to the Administration, all the 17 temporary cold shelters under HAD would be open when the cold weather warning was in force, and all shelters would provide hot meals (including hot soup) and hot water as well as other food items such as cup noodles and biscuits for every shelter user during the opening hours.

6. Some Members were concerned about cases of inhuman treatment of street sleepers by the Administration, e.g. some weekly cleaning operations conducted at pedestrian subways during cold days had wetted beddings of street sleepers and property of street sleepers was snatched during these operations. These Members called on the Administration to formulate

inter-departmental policies to protect the rights of street sleepers and ensure that all relevant government departments would treat street sleepers with respect. These Members also requested the Administration to notify street sleepers in advance of these operations and provide them with necessary assistance to timely remove their personal belongings. Stressing that it would continue to treat street sleepers with respect, the Administration advised that during the aforesaid operations, fenders were used to avoid wetting the beddings of street sleepers as far as possible. The NGOs providing services for street sleepers would inform street sleepers of the operations so that they would have an opportunity to pack up their personal belongings beforehand.

Provision of emergency shelters/hostel placements

7. 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 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.

8. 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 should 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.

9. Some Members considered that the imminent accommodation need of street sleepers in cold days could not be addressed promptly by the emergency shelters or urban hostels for single persons as the waiting time for admission to these shelters/hostels was at least six months. The Administration advised that as at February 2017, the utilization rate of the aforesaid hostels/emergency shelters was 82%. SWD subvented six NGOs to operate urban hostels for single persons and urban emergency shelters, providing a total of 222 subvented places. Together with 408 accommodation places operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis, there were a total of 630 known subvented and self-financing accommodation places for providing temporary accommodation for street sleepers and people on the verge of becoming homeless. The Administration would keep in view the situation and, subject to availability of resources, consider providing additional hostel places.

10. Noting that the average utilization rate of emergency shelters/hostels operated by NGOs had not yet reached their full capacity, some Members enquired about the reasons why some street sleepers were not willing to move into those hostels or shelters. Some other Members requested the Administration to examine the reasons why some street sleepers had reverted to street sleeping after they had been arranged for living in emergency shelters/hostels, so as to review and improve the effectiveness of the accommodation arrangement for street sleepers. The Administration advised that street sleeping was a complicated issue. While street sleeping was personal choice of many street sleepers, reasons for not moving into emergency shelters/hostels included "street sleeping was more convenient", "to save money", and "preferred street sleeping to living with others". 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 arrangement.

Provision of public rental housing units

11. 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

¹ According to the Administration, it was the policy of the Hong Kong Housing Authority ("HA") to accord priority to general applicants (i.e. family and elderly

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.

12. Some Members enquired about the situation of some street sleepers reverting to street sleeping after PRH units had been allocated to them. 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.

Financial and employment assistance for street sleepers

13. Members were informed that an allocation amounted to \$90,000 (as at July 2013) was included in the annual subvention for each of the three ISTs as ERF to cover eligible users' expenses such as payment of rent, rental deposit, other removal expenses and short-term living costs. Street sleepers might be assisted with ERF 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

one-person applicants) over non-elderly one-person applicants in the allocation of public rental housing ("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.

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 ERF to \$150,000 for each IST. The Administration advised that SWD would take into account the utilization of ERF and consider the need for further increase of the allocation.

14. 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.

15. 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

16. Some Members considered the existing support measures for street sleepers 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. Some other Members called on the Administration to review and improve the existing services for street sleepers. In this connection, the Administration was requested to set up an inter-departmental task group, which comprised government officials,

Legislative Council ("LegCo") Members and street sleepers, to identify improvements to support services for street sleepers. The Administration was also requested to commission a study in the future to find out more about the problem of street sleepers.

17. According to the Administration, individual government bureaux and departments ("B/Ds") 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. In addition, relevant B/Ds would continue to monitor closely the situation and work out inter-departmental action plans and strategies in the light of actual circumstances and needs of street sleepers. Appropriate measures would also be taken to jointly assist street sleepers having regard to their changing service needs.

Motions passed by the Panel on Welfare Services

18. The Panel passed seven motions at its meeting on 13 February 2017 urging the Administration to improve support services for street sleepers. The wording of these motions is in **Appendix I**.

Relevant papers

19. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in **Appendix II**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
29 March 2018

Panel on Welfare Services

**Motions passed under agenda item IV on
"Support for street sleepers"
at the meeting on 13 February 2017**

(Translation)

Motion 1

According to the record of the Social Welfare Department, the number of street sleepers rose from 487 in 2011 to 908 at the end of December 2016, representing a substantial increase of 90%. Under the Government's support policy, a total of 630 subsidized or self-financing hostel places are currently available in Hong Kong for application by all singletons. However, they enable only two-thirds of the street sleepers to benefit. The persistent shortage of hostel places for street sleepers, as well as the excessively short accommodation period which is capped at merely half a year, makes it difficult for social workers to help street sleepers give up street sleeping within a short period of time. Meanwhile, the Government has never made up for the substantial cut of 11% in the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") allowances due to the economic downturn in 1999. Moreover, 60% of the street sleepers who were on CSSA, received rent allowance and lived in sub-divided units have eventually reverted to street sleeping because they can no longer afford the high rent as a result of the rent increase by the landlord.

In this connection, this Panel requests the Government to:

1. increase the number of subsidized hostel places for street sleepers;
2. extend the accommodation period of the hostels for street sleepers to one year or more;
3. make up for the 11% cut in the CSSA allowances in 1999; and
4. study partial rent control.

Moved by: Hon Michael TIEN Puk-sun

Motion 2

This Panel agrees to the seven recommendations put forward in the 'Homeless Outreach Population Estimation Hong Kong 2015' by universities and four community organizations that provide services to the homeless, which include providing integrated support services on accommodation; immediately increasing the number of subsidized hostel places and extending the accommodation period of subsidized hostels; formulating policies on transitional housing and constructing temporary housing; paying attention to the health conditions of the homeless and introducing services of mobile dispensaries with medical staff; conducting territory-wide homeless street counts on a regular basis; drawing up policies for the homeless; and formulating policies on rental control, etc., so as to address basic needs of the homeless.

Moved by: Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung

Motion 3

This Panel requests the Police and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department not to remove or snatch belongings of street sleepers without their consent during eviction exercises against them.

Moved by: Dr Hon LAU Siu-lai*

Motion 4

This Panel requests the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department to stop sprinkling ammonia powder at the dwelling places of street sleepers.

Moved by: Dr Hon LAU Siu-lai*

Motion 5

This Panel suggests that the relevant staff of the Social Welfare Department, the Police and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department should visit and stay overnight at the dwelling places where street sleepers usually gather, so as to understand and experience the plight of street sleepers, and

show empathy and provide them with appropriate support.

Moved by: Dr Hon LAU Siu-lai*

Motion 6

This Panel requests the Social Welfare Department, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Police to establish a communication platform, provide street sleepers with adequate support and temporary accommodation at the same time of eviction, and stop evicting them in the absence of appropriate support.

Moved by: Dr Hon LAU Siu-lai*

Motion 7

This Panel requests the Police to stop using unnecessary force/violence during their inspections and eviction exercises against street sleepers.

Moved by: Dr Hon LAU Siu-lai*

* [According to the Judgment of the Court of First Instance of the High Court on 14 July 2017, LEUNG Kwok-hung, Nathan LAW Kwun-chung, YIU Chung-yim and LAU Siu-lai have been disqualified from assuming the office of a member of the Legislative Council, and have vacated the same since 12 October 2016, and are not entitled to act as a member of the Legislative Council.]

Appendix II

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

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	15 April 2015	Official Record of Proceeding Pages 96-100
Finance Committee	8 April 2016	Administration's replies to members' written questions in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2016-2017 Pages 180 -182 and 818
Finance Committee	8 April 2016	Administration's replies to members' written supplementary questions in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2016-2017 Page 7
Panel on Welfare Services	25 January 2016 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Subcommittee on Poverty	16 February 2016 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	13 February 2017 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	27 March 2017 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes