

**For discussion on
14 January 2019**

**Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Review on Compassionate Rehousing**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the progress of the review conducted by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) on Compassionate Rehousing (CR) case processing of social welfare service units.

Background

2. CR is a special housing assistance scheme put in place as early as the early 1970s, with the aim to providing housing assistance to individuals or families who have genuine and imminent housing needs but, owing to their social and medical needs (if applicable) under specific circumstances, have no other feasible means to solve their housing problems. In the initial stage after the CR was put in place, the SWD was responsible for assessing, approving and recommending CR cases to the Housing Department (HD). Subsequently, after recognising that CR was an effective means of resource to assist individuals or families in need, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) raised requests to the SWD for processing CR cases. As social workers of both NGOs and the SWD have the same professional qualifications, the SWD has since 1979 authorised NGO service units to process and assess CR cases. Given that public rental housing (PRH) is a valuable public resource, for ensuring fairness and consistent assessment standards, each recommended case would be examined by the respective District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO). DSWO would then make recommendation to the HD. On receiving a CR recommendation, the HD would arrange the client for detailed eligibility vetting and subsequent allocation of a PRH unit to the eligible client.

3. In assisting individuals or families in solving their accommodation or other problems, social workers have to adopt an integrated service approach to make comprehensive assessment and professional judgment in accordance with their mastery of case circumstances, and to explore various feasible solutions and intervene with counselling, so as to enhance the functioning and ability of individuals or families in overcoming

adversities. Recommending eligible cases to HD for CR is only one of the many means in resolving the client's accommodation problems. Other appropriate services include financial assistance, making referrals for suitable residential services/social housing schemes, and so forth.

4. CR is a valuable public resource. To further optimise the CR case processing so as to ensure consistency in the assessment and vetting standards, through the Working Group on Review on the Operation of Integrated Family Service Centre Services¹ (WG) under the Committee on Integrated Family Service Centres² (Committee), the SWD is reviewing and enhancing the vetting standards, handling procedures and assessment mechanism in processing CR cases with a view to facilitating social workers of various service units to more effectively process CR cases. The review commenced in November 2016, with the scope covering (i) to formulate a plan for clarifying the guiding directions on CR assessment standards; (ii) to conduct case analysis and collect views from relevant stakeholders on the current CR and case processing; and (iii) to submit the proposed enhancement measures and implementation plan.

Review Progress

5. Apart from reviewing the vetting standards, handling procedures and assessment mechanism of CR through the Committee and the WG, the SWD also collected views on processing CR cases from relevant stakeholders through the following means -

Focus group meetings

6. The SWD conducted two rounds with a total of 10 focus group meetings in March 2017 and January 2018. The SWD invited social workers of NGOs authorised for processing CR cases and social workers of relevant service units under the SWD (including integrated family service centres, medical social service units, rehabilitation service units, family and child protective service units, probation and community service orders offices, etc.) to participate in the focus group meetings. Among

¹ Members include managers/supervisors and frontline social workers of integrated family service centres/integrated services centres under the SWD and NGOs, as well as representatives of The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (The HKCSS).

² Members include Assistant District Social Welfare Officers responsible for supervising integrated family service centres under the SWD's 11 districts, coordinating/supervising officers of NGOs operating integrated family service centres/integrated services centres, as well as representatives of The HKCSS.

the 10 focus group meetings, eight sessions were arranged for social workers/supervising officers of relevant service units in accordance with their respective service nature, while relevant staff unions were invited to participate in the remaining two sessions.

Case Study

7. The SWD conducted a case study from March to November 2017 which collected information from a total of 143 CR cases. The case study analysed the assessment standards, the scale/extent of vetting, as well as the difficulties encountered by NGOs in processing non-recommended CR cases or recommended CR cases. The study analysis found that the difficulties encountered by social workers in processing non-recommended CR cases or recommended CR cases were similar to the views collected from the focus group meetings, including the different views held by the SWD and NGOs on issues such as vetting breadth, exercise of discretionary power, as well as formulation of the best welfare plan for clients, etc.

Consultation conducted in various platforms

8. Since the beginning of the review, the SWD conducted consultations in respect of the review as well as draft enhancement measures and plans through the Liaison Group on Issues Relating to Housing Assistance Cases³ (LG), the SWD's relevant service branches as well as the relevant platforms under the purview of various DSWOs. Besides, from May 2017 to November 2018, the SWD convened meetings with relevant staff unions/organisations/service units upon their requests and views on the review were exchanged. In addition, the SWD has from time to time uploaded the latest progress of the review on 'What's New' of the SWD Homepage and encouraged stakeholders to express their views on processing CR cases through electronic mail, fax or post mail.

Proposed Enhancement Measures

9. The SWD collected views through the aforementioned means.

³ Members include (a) Assistant Director, District Social Work Officer, Chief Social Work Officer and Senior Social Work Officer of the SWD, (b) Assistant Directors, Chief Manager/Management and Chief Housing Manager of the HD, (c) service coordinators/supervisors of NGO-run integrated family service centres and integrated services centres, as well as (d) representatives of The HKCSS.

The relevant enhancement measures discussed and endorsed by the WG and the Committee are as follows –

- (i) aligning/coordinating the assessment standards and the extent of vetting;
- (ii) reviewing the workflow in processing CR cases as well as defining the role and duties of different staff, so as to clarify the role and responsibility of management staff and the SWD's district contact persons⁴;
- (iii) reviewing the guidelines for processing CR cases with a view to updating the procedure and time frame on CR case processing; and
- (iv) enhancing the understanding of various stakeholders/public on the purpose and nature of CR, which is a special housing assistance scheme.

10. Apart from the aforementioned enhancement measures, there were also views collected from focus group discussions and consultation with written submissions which mentioned about the set-up of a specialised team (ST) for processing CR cases. After consolidating the views collected, the views proposing the set-up of the ST mainly considered that the assessment standards could be more consistent if the CR cases could be handled by a smaller number of social workers. As regards the views against the set-up of the ST, the rationale was that CR had been perceived as one of the means and resources for social workers to assist clients in resolving difficulties – housing need had often been embedded in the family context and mingled with other welfare needs, it had been considered infeasible to be segregated and handled separately, and this would be contradictory to the family-oriented integrated service principle that the welfare sector had always been advocating. In addition, as there were quite a large number of CR cases, the manpower resource redeployment issue hence involved would be rather complicated. Having considered that no consensus could be reached among the SWD colleagues on the proposal of setting up the ST and, in fact, there were even quite a lot of objections, the SWD therefore has no plan to set up the ST internally, but would first implement the proposed enhancement measures as mentioned in paragraph 9 above. Nevertheless, the SWD is adopting an

⁴ The SWD's DSWOs could appoint district contact persons to handle CR cases referred by NGO integrated family service centres and integrated services centres to the SWD.

open attitude for NGOs to set up the STs – NGOs could consider setting up the STs with their available resources, while the SWD would render them with the needed assistance, including giving advice to controversial cases and making appropriate liaison with the HD, etc.

11. On the other hand, from September to November 2018, the SWD consulted relevant stakeholders on the enhancement measures and views as mentioned in paragraphs 9 and 10 above through electronic mails and various platforms. A total of 85 submissions were received. Most of them agreed to the above recommendations.

Conclusion and Way Forward

12. Starting from the first quarter of 2019, the SWD will progressively deliberate and implement the enhancement measures as mentioned in paragraph 9 above. A task force will be formed in the SWD headquarters to align/coordinate the assessment standards and scale of vetting of CR cases. The SWD would continue to work in conjunction with the HD, NGO staff and The HKCSS. Through the LG, the Committee, the WG and the task force that will soon be set up, the SWD would monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the aforementioned enhancement measures, as well as make timely amendments and perfect the guidelines, so as to further facilitate frontline social workers' understanding on processing CR cases.

Social Welfare Department
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