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Panel on Welfare Services

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 9 May 2011

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper provides background information and gives an account of the discussions of the Panel on Welfare Services ("the Panel") on the support services for street sleepers.

Background

2. At present, the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") has been subventing three non-governmental organizations ("NGOs") to each operate an Integrated Services Team ("IST") for Street Sleepers. A package of integrated services includes outreaching visits (including midnight outreaching), counselling and group activities, personal care such as bathing, hair-cutting, employment guidance, escorting, emergency fund, emergency shelter/hostel placement, as well as the service referrals, and is aimed at helping them to give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community. 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 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 have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with SSR on a monthly basis; and de-register the case when it is confirmed that the street

sleepers have given up street sleeping. According to the Administration, the number of registered street sleepers as of October 2010 was 385, representing a drop as compared with 428 in the same month of the previous year.

Deliberations by the Panel

Three-year Action Plan to Help Street Sleepers

4. At its meeting on 9 April 2001, the Panel discussed the Three-year Action Plan to Help Street Sleepers ("Action Plan"). As the number of street sleepers in SSR had risen rapidly from 819 in January 2000 to 1 399 in February 2001, SWD had, in consultation with three NGOs specializing in street sleeper services (namely St. James' Settlement ("SJS"), The Salvation Army ("SA") and Christian Concern for the Homeless Association ("CCHA")) drawn up a three-year action plan to tackle the specific needs of street sleepers, in particular, to assist those younger, able-bodied and unemployed street sleepers to rejoin the work force. A Lotteries Fund grant of \$8.73 million was approved for implementing the Action Plan from April 2001 to March 2004. The Action Plan comprised three key elements -

- (a) midnight outreaching and other integrated supportive services for street sleepers (including provision of emergency funds and emergency placements, assistance in seeking job placement and long-term housing, and counselling) provided by three NGOs;
- (b) an emergency shelter in Wan Chai run by SJS; and
- (c) an evaluative research conducted by the City University of Hong Kong ("CityU") to assess the effectiveness of the services in (a) and (b) above as well as the existing services tackling the street sleeper problem.

5. The Panel was updated on 10 June 2002 of the progress of the Action Plan's first year of operation and other improvement measures taken during the period to complement the Action Plan. In gist, the Action Plan had some initial positive outcomes since its operation in one year's time. To tie in with the Action Plan, SWD had taken a number of initiatives and measures, viz. improving hostel services for singletons, interfacing with specialized service units such as the Society of Rehabilitation and Crime

Prevention and Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers to provide services to street sleepers with special needs, and strengthening district efforts in tackling the street sleeper problem.

6. While noting that the Administration would revert to the Panel on the findings of the evaluative research conducted by CityU, members were concerned about the accommodation needs of the street sleepers. The Administration explained that the Action Plan included setting up an emergency shelter in Wan Chan run by SJS which was an expedient form of transit housing before more long term arrangement could be made for street sleepers to live in private rental housing or hostels. Most of the hostels run by NGOs on a subvented or self-financing basis could continue to provide temporary accommodation for street sleepers until they found more permanent accommodation. In view of the characteristics of the street sleepers, other types of accommodation such as provision of hostel services would be a more suitable interim measure to assist the street sleepers who were mostly unemployed and financially unstable.

7. In response to members' suggestion of providing special grants to street sleepers under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") Scheme to help them pay rental deposits, the Administration advised that the provision of emergency fund was considered a more efficient way to assist the street sleepers in solving their immediate needs. About 55% of the emergency fund included in the Action Plan budget had been granted to needy street sleepers for paying rental expenses.

Provision of services by the new ISTs

8. At its meeting on 13 April 2004, the Panel was briefed on the findings of the final report of the evaluative research conducted by CityU and SWD's plan to revamp its street sleeper services. Based on the findings of the final evaluation of the Action Plan, 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.

9. Members noted that the Administration considered the Action Plan effective in tackling the street sleeper problem as reflected by the declining number of street sleepers, as well as promoting self-reliance and promoting social well-being of street sleepers. With the experience of the Action Plan, the Administration agreed with the research team's recommendation that service integration should be both a strategy and direction to tackle the street sleeper problem.

10. 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, modelled after the Action Plan, to provide one-stop integrated services for street sleepers to cover the whole territories. 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, Integrated Family Service Centres/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.

11. Members expressed support in principle for revamping street sleepers service. However, some members expressed concern about the resources for the three NGOs to operate the three new ISTs. The Administration advised that the resources would be pooled from the recurrent subventions of \$3.4 million to SJS and SA for the subvented services including two day relief centres and two urban hostels for singletons which were no longer required, and from the savings of \$2.6

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.

million 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.

12. 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.

13. Members noted that as exemplified by the Action Plan which had been proven effective in helping street sleepers who were younger, better educated, in normal health and with shorter duration of street sleeping to live off the street, a similar integrated approach in providing a continuum of services would be adopted to help those hardcore street sleepers to live off the street and become self-reliant. As the Action Plan would expire on 31 March 2004, the three new ISTs would be in place with effect from 1 April 2004 to maintain continuity of service. On the same day, SWD's three SSOTs would cease to provide service.

Difficulties faced by street sleepers

14. Noting a rise in the number of street sleepers since the last quarter of 2008, the Panel examined the support services for street sleepers at its meeting on 16 April 2009 and received views from deputations on the difficulties faced by street sleepers. Members noted with concern an increasing number of Hong Kong residents who used to work in the Mainland to return to Hong Kong due to loss of jobs amidst the financial tsunami. These Hong Kong permanent residents were not eligible for applying for 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 strengthen the support services for street sleepers by providing more services to ISTs, re-opening the singleton hostels previously operated by the Home Affairs Department ("HAD"), enhancing the employment assistance schemes and reviewing the CSSA Scheme.

15. The Administration advised that SWD had put in place a wide range of support services to address the emergency and accommodation needs of street sleepers. To address the accommodation needs of street sleepers, an allocation of \$50,000 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.

16. 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, would 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 for consideration of allocating public rental housing units under the compassionate rehousing arrangement.

17. In response to the proposal for re-opening the singleton hostels previously operated by HAD, the Administration explained that the Singleton Hostel Programme 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.

18. 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 Integrated Family Service Centres to tide over the short-term difficulties.

Relevant papers

19. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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Appendix

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

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