

## LCQ3: Piling up miscellaneous articles in public places

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hoi-yan and a reply by the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs, Miss Alice Mak, in the Legislative Council today (March 20):

Question:

Recently, some members of the public have relayed that the piling up of miscellaneous articles in subways near their homes has become increasingly serious. Apart from using wooden panels and cloths by some people to enclose street sleeping spaces, appliances such as liquefied petroleum gas cylinders and cassette cookers are also placed at the scene, posing serious fire hazards. The large amount of miscellaneous articles obstructing passageways has also given rise to environmental hygiene and safety issues, causing great distress to nearby residents. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of interdepartmental joint operations coordinated by the Government in the past three years to tackle cases of miscellaneous articles piling up in public places; among such cases, the number of those involving illegal acts, and the respective numbers of fixed penalty notices issued and prosecutions instituted by the Government in respect of such cases;

(2) among the aforesaid operations, of the number of those involving street sleepers; the number of such street sleepers who have moved into public rental housing, short-term hostels or other suitable accommodation with the Government's assistance, and how it balanced the interests of street sleepers, residents and relevant stakeholders in the process; and

(3) as it is learnt that the number of cases involving the occupation of public places for piling up miscellaneous articles has shown an upward trend, and many of such cases involve various issues such as housing, finance, family conditions and even mental health, which are complex and entail a complicated handling process, whether the authorities will consider setting up a dedicated interdepartmental joint office to deal with the relevant issues, so as to prevent the situation from worsening?

Reply:

President,

Accumulation of miscellaneous articles in public places is often associated with street sleeping, which is a complicated social issue. Each and every street sleeping case has its own circumstances, which may involve family, economic and financial or even mental health problems; whereas environmental hygiene is one of the impacts arising from the accumulation of

articles. Relevant government departments have all along been handling the problems of accumulated articles in public places and street sleeping according to their delineated purviews and responsibilities, including providing assistance to street sleepers on areas such as accommodation, welfare and medical services, as well as conducting inter-departmental clearance operations at the district level. Departments have been collaborating closely with a view to rendering appropriate support to facilitate the return of street sleepers to sheltered life on the one hand, and on the other clearing black spots and articles accumulated thereat as soon as possible so as to minimise environmental nuisance to nearby residents.

Having consulted the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the Environment and Ecology Bureau and the Development Bureau, the consolidated reply to the three parts of the questions is as follows:

(1) The Government is committed to improving environmental hygiene in order to safeguard public health. Tackling the issue of accumulated articles in public places involves the work of various departments. Generally speaking, depending on the areas and situations of the accumulation concerned law enforcement departments including the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and the Lands Department (LandsD) will exercise their respective authorities to undertake clearance actions. District Offices (DOs) will co-ordinate inter-departmental joint operations on a need basis where cases are more complicated or require multiple departments to address.

For the three-year period between 2021 and 2023, 18 DOs have co-ordinated nearly 1 770 inter-departmental joint operations to clear accumulated articles in public places, including but not limited to street-sleeping spots. We do not have a breakdown for joint operations targeting specifically street-sleeping spots.

During the inter-departmental joint operations, the FEHD will take enforcement actions targeting the environmental hygiene problems caused by accumulation of articles in public places according to the established mechanism, and will provide cleansing services such as street sweeping and washing as necessary. Over the past three years, the FEHD issued a total of 30 summonses and 36 fixed penalty notices during the joint operations. No summonses or fixed penalty notices were issued to street sleepers during these operations.

The Lands Department (LandsD) also actively participates in the inter-departmental joint operations, invoking the Land (Miscellaneous Provisions) Ordinance (Cap. 28) to enforce against unlawful occupation of government land by structures or fixed objects. In respect of miscellaneous articles placed in public places, the LandsD is mainly responsible for handling tents and structures left behind. During the joint operations, the LandsD will post statutory notices in accordance with the said ordinance requiring the occupier to cease occupation before a specified deadline. If the situation does not improve upon expiry of the deadline, the LandsD will take further actions, including taking possession of and clearing the property or

structures remaining on the land. In the past three years, the LandsD encountered 49 substantiated cases of illegal occupation of government land when participating in the inter-departmental joint operations. All of them have been handled or cleared.

(2) The Social Welfare Department (SWD) provides subvention to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for operating Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers (ISTs) to conduct outreach visits for proactively reaching out to street sleepers, thereby understanding their reasons for street sleeping and rendering integrated services according to their actual needs and willingness to receive services. These services, including counselling, service referral, short-term accommodation and application for financial assistance, etc., are provided to address the urgent welfare needs of street sleepers, thereby helping them live off the streets and reintegrate into the community.

Through the ISTs, the SWD also provides emergency cash relief to street sleepers in need, for tidying over their financial difficulties and interim expenses arising from emergency situations, such as rental and living expenses, rental deposits, other moving expenses and short-term living expenses, etc.

In addition, the SWD provides subvention to NGOs to operate short-term hostels, with a view to providing transitional accommodation for street sleepers to tide them over to more stable living arrangements. Hostel social workers will maintain close communication with caseworkers to rigorously review the actual situation of street sleepers during their stay at these short-term hostels, and help them make more stable accommodation arrangements. Examples of such arrangements include assisting them in renting private tenements, referring them to apply for residential care services for the elderly and other accommodation assistance programmes.

(3) As previously mentioned, street sleeping is a complicated social issue and the issue cannot be tackled solely from the environmental hygiene perspective. Relevant departments have been fostering close collaboration to provide welfare support to street sleepers and help them live off the streets. Through enforcement actions undertaken on their own or jointly with others, departments have also been addressing environmental hygiene conditions associated with street sleeping so as to mitigate environmental nuisance caused to nearby residents.

The Home Affairs Department (HAD) and DOs have been closely monitoring street sleeping situations at the districts. Apart from regularly referring cases to relevant departments for follow-up, DOs also coordinate joint operations as necessary to improve environmental hygiene at the street sleeping spots. Prior to the conduct of a joint operation, DO concerned will liaise with the SWD on the clearance plan and the SWD will then approach street sleepers to provide suitable assistance beforehand. Social workers of agencies subvented by the SWD also visit the street sleepers at different time to understand their needs and offer assistance.

Under the strengthened structure of district governance, the Task Force on District Governance (TFDG) chaired by the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration oversees bureaux and departments in the provision of district work and implementation of related policies and measures, and where necessary coordinates the handling of inter-departmental and/or cross-district issues. The Working Group of Environmental Hygiene and Cityscape under the TFDG has also been following up on environmental hygiene issues, and provides steer for addressing "longstanding, big and difficult" environmental hygiene problems as necessary.

All in all, the HAD and DOs together with relevant departments including the FEHD and the LandsD will continue to implement various measures for improving environmental hygiene and conduct inter-departmental joint operations in a timely manner with a view to enhancing the local environment. Meanwhile, the SWD and relevant departments will closely monitor the welfare needs of street sleepers and provide appropriate support so as to facilitate their reintegration into the community.