TRIPARTITE ADVISORY ON ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CLEANING SECTOR IN VIEW OF COVID-19

Introduction

1. This advisory provides recommendations on measures that service buyers and providers should adopt to ensure the sustainability of the cleaning sector in view of COVID-19.

Crucial to Ensure Sustainability of Cleaning Sector

2. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant disruptions to the demand and supply of cleaning services by service buyers and providers respectively, as well as the livelihoods of cleaners. Adjustments would have to be made by all stakeholders through close cooperation to ensure the sustainability of the cleaning sector, with the support of the Government.

3. Notwithstanding that cleaning is an outsourced service, service buyers play a critical role in ensuring the sustainability of service providers and the cleaning sector. This includes making reasonable business arrangements that enable service providers to continue to employ their cleaners and retain their capabilities even during the Circuit Breaker period or in a downturn, so that essential cleaning services can be maintained during this period and resume further when businesses reopen and the economy starts to recover.

4. As the COVID-19 situation is likely to be drawn out, unsustainable practices will compromise the ability of service providers to keep premises clean during this crucial period, as well as their longer-term viability. Such an outcome would be detrimental to service buyers, service providers and cleaners, as well as the general public.

Recommendations

5. **Reprioritise and reallocate cleaning needs**. Especially for premises with increased cleaning intensity without increased fee payments, service buyers should exercise flexibility and work with providers to review cleaning needs. Cleaning should be focused on higher priority areas (e.g. locations with higher footfall), while reducing cleaning intensity and/or frequency at lower priority areas, without being constrained by existing headcount-based or outcome-based contracts. This redistribution can help to manage service providers' and cleaners' workloads and maintain it at levels consistent with their normal scope of duties. If the cleaning intensity and/or frequency remains significantly higher even after reprioritisation and reallocation, service buyers should consider exercising their discretion to provide additional payments to service providers and cleaners (see also para 7).

6. **Exercise restraint in activating penalty clauses**. At the same time, service buyers should demonstrate understanding towards service providers during this COVID-19 pandemic by exercising restraint in activating liquidated damages contract

clauses to penalise service providers, for breaches in contract clauses that are beyond the service providers' control.

7. **Pay service providers appropriately**. Service providers should be paid as per contract terms if there is no change in cleaning services required. Specifically, service buyers should not ask for reduced contract fees on the basis that their service providers are receiving wage support through the enhanced Jobs Support Scheme which is intended to help enterprises retain their local employees during this period of economic uncertainty. If there is any significant change in cleaning services required, service buyers should engage service providers to reach a mutually agreed revision to payments for the cleaning services:

a. **Pay for additional services on top of regular cleaning contract.** Significant nett increases in cleaning services (e.g. deep cleaning of premises due to confirmed or potential COVID-19 cases) should be accompanied by increased payments.

b. **Maintain baseline level of cleaning services.** Even when there are significant decreases in cleaning services required (e.g. due to reduced footfall), it is recommended that some baseline level of cleaning is maintained for health and sanitation reasons, so that such premises will be able to resume operations without health or environmental hazards thereafter. Payments to service providers can be mutually agreed considering the revised baseline level of cleaning.

8. **Remunerate cleaners appropriately**. If there is any significant change in cleaning services required, service providers should remunerate their cleaners appropriately:

a. For cleaners with higher workloads (e.g. due to increased frequency and intensity of cleaning), service providers should consider increasing their wages, and/or providing them with allowances. This is also in recognition that cleaners face additional exposure in cleaning and disinfecting potentially contaminated premises.

b. For cleaners with reduced workloads (e.g. due to decreased footfalls, or decreased service provision required arising from Circuit Breaker measures), service providers should comply with the advisories related to salary and leave arrangements[1], including taking into consideration Government support[2] to retain and continue to pay their employees, even during periods of reduction in business activity.

[1] This includes the advisory on salary and leave arrangements during Circuit Breaker, issued on 6 Apr 2020 – www.mom.gov.sg/covid-19/advisory-on-salary-and-leave.

[2] The Government's Jobs Support Scheme provides companies, including cleaning service providers, with wage support amounting to 75% (during the Circuit Breaker period), and at least 25% (other periods) of local employees' wages for 9 months.
www.iras.gov.sg/irashome/Schemes/Businesses/Jobs-Support-Scheme--JSS-/

9. **Seize opportunity to upskill workers.** Service providers should consider taking this opportunity to send cleaners, particularly those with decreased workloads, for training and upskilling. They can tap on Government support, such as the Workfare Training Support[3] and Enhanced Training Support for SMEs, to help defray training costs as well as receive absentee payroll funding.

10. **Continue to ensure workplace safety and health (WSH) of cleaners.** Our cleaners are at the frontline in our fight against the COVID-19 pandemic; they face additional exposure and increased workloads. These risk factors reinforce the importance of service buyers and providers ensuring that workplaces are made safe for them, such as the provision of suitable personal protective equipment, and emplacement on relevant WSH training courses.

Conclusion

11. The COVID-19 pandemic is a difficult period for both service buyers and providers, as well as cleaners. All stakeholders should share the responsibilities arising from changes in cleaning services required. The tripartite partners call on all stakeholders to work together, to review and reprioritise cleaning needs, as well as explore voluntary renegotiation of contracts or payments for variations in cleaning intensity and/or frequency. Cleaners should be appropriately recognised and remunerated for any increased workload and risks they shoulder. This will ensure the sustainability of cleaning business operations and the cleanliness of our premises during this COVID-19 pandemic.

12. For further queries, please contact:

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[3] Enhanced as the Workfare Skills Support scheme from 1 Jul 2020.
www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/budget2020/factsheet-workfare-skills-support-scheme.pdf

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This tripartite advisory is issued by the National Environment Agency, Ministry of Manpower, National Trades Union Congress, Singapore National Employers Federation, Environmental Management Association of Singapore, and Tripartite Cluster for Cleaners.