

LegCo Panel on Home Affairs

Enhancement of the Role and Functions of District Councils and Government Support for District Council Members

Purpose

This paper outlines the measures that have been taken so far to enhance the role and functions of the District Councils (DCs) and the support and assistance provided by the Government to DC members.

Background

2. We appreciate the useful role played by the DCs in advising on the provision and delivery of public services in the districts and acting as an effective bridge between the Government and the public. The Government has since the establishment of the DCs on 1 January 2000 taken progressive steps to enhance their role and functions as well as the support provided to DC members.

A. Enhancement of the role of DCs

3. With the regard to the enhancement of the role of the DCs and their participation in district management, the following measures have been implemented:

- (a) ***involvement in district management:*** firstly, to enable the DC chairmen and vice-chairmen to play a more active and direct part in the management of district affairs and resolution of local problems, we have invited them to attend meetings of the respective District Management Committees (DMCs) as full members. The DMC is a working forum responsible for various facets of district management. Secondly, to strengthen the role of DCs in monitoring the delivery of environmental hygiene services, each DC has set up a Committee on Environmental Improvement, or expanded the role of an existing one. These committees regularly receive reports from the Food and

Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). Thirdly, DC members are invited to sit on the Market Management Consultative Committees under the FEHD to advise on market management matters. We will continue to explore with the departments concerned the possibility of inviting DC members to advise on the management of other district facilities where appropriate;

- (b) *funding for community building programmes:* each DC has been allocated funds for implementing or sponsoring community building activities and minor environmental improvement projects. In 1999-2000, a total of 130 million had been allocated for this purpose. For 2000-01, we have provided Home Affairs Department (HAD) with an additional \$13 million for the promotion of cultural, recreational and sports activities at district level;
- (c) *funding for minor works programmes:* the DC chairmen/vice-chairmen sit on the Central Steering Committees and District Working Groups established under the Rural Public Works and the new Urban Minor Works Programme (introduced this year with initial funding of \$35 million) to advise on the use of funds allocated to these programmes which aim to improve the environment in the districts; and
- (d) *communication with the Administration:* the Director of Home Affairs chairs a monthly meeting with the DC chairmen, which provides a useful forum for exchange of ideas between the chairmen and individual bureau secretaries/heads of departments. To foster closer working relationship with the DCs, the heads of the two new departments, namely FEHD and Leisure, Culture and Sports Department (LCSD), have either completed or are undertaking their visits to DCs.

B. Enhanced Support for DC Members

4. With the enhancement of DCs' role in advising the Government on district issues, the Government has also increased the resources and financial support provided to DC members to enable them to carry out their duties effectively.

(a) Information Technology (IT) Support

5. We have provided personal computers for DC chairmen and vice-chairmen in the DC secretariats, which are equipped with Internet and e-mail facilities. Relevant training are being provided to DC members to web-enable them. The IT facilities will in turn enhance communication among the DC members and between members and the Government. To further facilitate communication between the DCs and members of the public, HAD plans to set up a basic platform for independent homepages for the 18 DCs by mid-November 2000.

(b) Financial Support

6. DC members receive a monthly honorarium and an accountable allowance to cover their actual expenses for hiring assistants and maintaining local offices. The rates of the honorarium and the accountable allowance are revised annually with reference to the movement of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). (This is in line with the revision of the rate of remuneration and operating expenses reimbursement for LegCo members.) Details of the honorarium and accountable allowance are given below.

(i) Honorarium :

7. This was first introduced in 1982 for the District Boards (DBs) at the rate of \$2000 per month to cover expenses arising from, and compensating them to some extent for the time spent on, council business. The current rate of honorarium for DC members is as follows:

| | <u>Single membership</u> | <u>Multiple membership*</u> |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) Chairmen | \$36,380 | \$30,320 |
| (b) Vice-chairmen# | \$27,290 | \$21,230 |
| (c) Members | \$18,190 | \$12,130 |

* DC members holding concurrently membership in the Executive Council and/or Legislative Council.

DC vice-chairman is offered a special allowance equivalent to 50% of a member's honorarium.

(ii) Accountable Allowance:

8. In 1996, an accountable Office Rental Allowance (ORA) with a ceiling of \$4,500 per month was introduced to assist DB members to set up ward offices in their districts and to meet the expenses incurred in the running of offices for discharging DB duties. In recognition of the enhanced role of the DCs, the Finance Committee (FC) of LegCo approved in July 1999 a special allowance for vice-chairmen of DCs and a new Accountable Allowance (AA) replacing the ORA for DC members with effect from 1 January 2000. Apart from meeting the expenses incurred by DC members related to the running of their offices, the AA also covers the expenses for members to employ assistants for discharging DC duties in the district. DC members are now eligible for an AA of up to \$10,000 per month. The AA is reimbursable, on production of certified receipts, to meet the expenses incurred wholly and necessarily for discharging DC duties.

Review of the Role and Functions of DCs

9.. The DCs have now operated for some eleven months. We believe that it is the right time to start a review to see how we can further enhance the role of the DCs and strengthen the support for DC members. As a first step, we will organise a District Administration Seminar on 18 November 2000 to provide a forum for DC members to express their views on the operation of the DCs and to suggest areas for improvement. The Seminar will enable us to better grasp the views of DC members on the District Administration Scheme and the support they require. We will consider these views very carefully when we review the role of the DCs later.

10. Apart from the Seminar, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) and HAD will continue to listen carefully to the views expressed by the DCs. The DCs are always welcome to put forward their views to HAB or HAD regarding the role and functions of the DCs.

Advice Sought

11. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.