

**For discussion
on 27 July 2010**

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
PANEL ON DEVELOPMENT**

TREE MANAGEMENT

PURPOSE

This paper outlines Government's tree management policy and the implementation of this policy under the steer of the Tree Management Office in the Development Bureau (DEVB).

TREE MANAGEMENT POLICY

Establishment of the Greening, Landscape and Tree Management Section in DEVB

2. Following a comprehensive review conducted in 2009, the Task Force on Tree Management, led by the Chief Secretary for Administration, published the "Report of the Task Force on Tree Management – People, Tree, Harmony" in June 2009. The Greening, Landscape and Tree Management (GLTM) Section was established under the Works Branch of DEVB in March 2010¹ to champion a new, strategic policy on greening, landscaping and tree management, with a view to achieving the sustainable development of a greener environment for Hong Kong.

3. The GLTM Section is underpinned by the Greening and Landscape Office (GLO) and the Tree Management Office (TMO). The GLO is responsible for central coordination of Government's greening and landscape planning and design efforts, while the TMO advocates the adoption of a professional approach to tree management among tree management departments and in the community at large. Each with its focus and priority tasks, the two offices work in close cooperation to promote a holistic greening approach embracing adequate space allocation for new planting, proper selection of planting species as well as quality landscape design and planting practices in the upstream and proper vegetation maintenance in the downstream, with due emphasis on protection of public safety as a priority consideration.

¹ The setting up of the GLTM Section involves the net creation of 21 posts (including two new directorate civil service posts, 17 new non-directorate civil service posts and two non civil service contract posts), with an annual recurrent expenditure of about \$15.8 million.

Integrated approach to tree management

4. Government adopts an “integrated approach” for the management of trees on Government land. In essence, the department responsible for the maintenance of an area or a facility is also responsible for the maintenance of trees there. The Task Force on Tree Management reaffirmed that this approach was generally efficient and cost-effective. To facilitate better coordination of the work of different tree management departments², the TMO under the newly established GLTM Section acts as a central authority to give policy steer on tree management matters and a provider of expertise in tree management. It is relevant to note that a similar approach is adopted in Hong Kong’s slope safety work with the Geotechnical Engineering Office of the Civil Engineering and Development Department under DEVB playing the policy steer, professional and public education roles. This system has served Hong Kong well.

WORK FOCUS OF THE TMO

5. Pursuant to the recommendations in the Task Force Report, the TMO focuses on the following key areas of work –

- (a) enhancement of tree risk management;
- (b) promotion of a quality-oriented approach to tree management through formulation of standards, guidelines and best practices as well as research;
- (c) enhancement of the tree complaint handling mechanism and the emergency response arrangement;
- (d) enhanced training to raise the professional standard of the tree management personnel; and
- (e) enhancement of public education and community involvement.

² To augment the resources devoted to tree management, a total of 33 new non-directorate posts were created in the tree management departments from 2010-11 and an additional \$24.6 million in recurrent expenditure is allocated to the tree management departments from 2010-11 to enhance staff training, procure equipment and engage external service, etc. In addition, departments have made available additional resources for tree management through internal redeployment. For instance, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has expanded its tree team from a complement of 124 to 221.

(A) Enhancement of Tree Risk Management

6. As advocated by the Task Force on Tree Management, the TMO implemented the new tree risk assessment arrangements in collaboration with the tree management departments in January this year to better protect public safety. Under the new arrangements promulgated by the TMO, tree risk assessment is conducted step-by-step in two stages. In the first stage which involves an “area basis” assessment, departments first identify those areas with high pedestrian or vehicular flow under their management. In the second stage involving a “tree basis” assessment, departments carry out tree group inspections at locations with high pedestrian or vehicular flow in accordance with a systematic methodology and procedures.

7. During tree group inspections, departments identify trees that may require particular care (such as Old and Valuable Trees (OVTs) and stonewall trees) as well as dead trees and trees with health or structural problems that may pose hazards to the public. Detailed inspections are then conducted individually for these trees to assess their health and structural conditions.

8. In the course of visual assessment³, the tree inspection party will also be assisted by appropriate inspection methods (e.g. hammering the trunk with a rubber mallet to test the internal hollow, detecting any unusual smell for indication of underground root decay, etc.) and by simple tools (e.g. measuring tape and levels to ascertain the crown dimension, tree height and trunk inclination). If considered necessary, the visual assessment may be followed by detailed inspection of the tree conditions by using the sophisticated equipment (e.g. resistograph instrument or tomography instrument to check whether there is internal rot or tree cavity).

9. Based on the assessment of the tree conditions, appropriate risk mitigation measures (such as pruning, removal of wilted branch, treatment of pest and disease, and cabling and propping to support trees) will be prescribed, and the tree management department concerned will follow up promptly. If there are no other feasible remedial measures, departments will remove hazardous trees as a last resort so as to eliminate the threat to public safety.

³ Visual assessment is an internationally recognised tree inspection method which uses the growth response and form of trees to detect defects. The tree inspection party will systematically inspect the tree crown, branches, trunk and the root to assess whether there is any health or structural problem, ascertain the overall condition and prescribe appropriate follow-up action.

10. The health and structural conditions of trees change in step with the normal life cycle of living organisms (i.e. they grow, age, become weak and die) and as a result of constant changes in the external environment, especially under inclement weather. Tree risk assessment is, therefore, not a one-off exercise, but needs to be carried out continuously as part of the on-going tree maintenance work.

11. In support of the implementation of the new tree risk assessment arrangements, the TMO has provided training to over 2 230 government staff and contractor staff at the managerial, supervisory and frontline level on the methodology and procedural steps of tree risk assessment earlier this year.

12. To complement these tree risk management efforts, under the steer of DEVB, we have implemented the following improvement measures –

- (a) Tree management departments will ensure that their day-to-day tree management work is conducted in a professional manner. They will also adopt quality assurance measures such as close supervision of frontline work and internal audit;
- (b) All departments will handle tree complaints promptly so as to identify problematic trees as soon as possible and take necessary follow-up actions in a timely manner;
- (c) The TMO has enhanced monitoring of tree management work carried out by departments. This includes, among others, random check of the tree inspection forms completed by departments and random inspection on site of the condition of trees on Government land;
- (d) Tree management departments will closely monitor the conditions of trees under their care during the rainy season. Should there be any change in the risk level of individual trees, immediate follow-up actions will be taken. Depending on the actual tree conditions and where there are no other feasible risk mitigation measures, trees will be removed as a last resort so as to eliminate the threat to public safety; and
- (e) The TMO will continue to arrange training on tree risk arrangement for the tree management departments in the light of their operational needs. We will also encourage staff of various levels to obtain professional qualifications in

arboriculture, with a view to generally raising the professional standard of our tree management staff.

13. In order to encourage community-wide surveillance of trees in our community, DEVB, in collaboration with the tree management departments, released information on 1 154 trees for which the tree management departments have carried out detailed inspections via a dedicated tree webpage (<http://www.trees.gov.hk>) on 16 July 2010. These trees include 902 OVTs and stonewall trees which require special attention and 252 trees for which the improvement measures have not yet been completed. This list will be updated from time to time to reflect the up-to-date conditions of these trees and the results of ongoing inspections under the risk assessment framework. We will continue to encourage members of the public to assist in monitoring the conditions of trees in the territory through enhanced engagement with the Green Ambassadors⁴, the District Tree Care Volunteers⁵, public housing tenants and students, etc., thereby helping Government to carry out its tree risk management work more effectively.

(B) Promotion of a Quality-oriented Approach to Tree Management Through Formulation of Standards, Guidelines and Best Practices as well as Research

14. To promote a professional and quality-oriented approach to tree management, the TMO is tasked to formulate standards, guidelines and best practices on all aspects of tree management work (such as space allocation requirements for street trees, choice of tree species, control of pest and disease, protection of trees within construction sites, tree removal and compensatory planting, tree transplanting, etc.), for promulgation to tree management departments or for incorporation into the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines where appropriate. The TMO also prepares case studies on tree management for departments to learn from the experience of others. In addition, the TMO will disseminate these tree management standards, guidelines and best practices to the industry and the community⁶ at large through DEVB's website, seminars, workshops, etc.

⁴ LCSD has appointed about 170 Green Ambassadors including District Councillors and community leaders in April 2010 to assist Government in the surveillance of trees in the community.

⁵ LCSD will continue to recruit more District Tree Care Volunteers under the existing Green Volunteer Scheme to participate in the surveillance of trees in the community as part of the Government's community involvement programme in greening and tree management.

⁶ These include "Pictorial Guide for Tree Maintenance"; "Do's and Don'ts in Pruning"; "Keep Your Tree Safe" and "Pictorial Guide for Tree Maintenance to Reduce Tree Risks".

15. In its endeavour to raise the standard of tree management work in Hong Kong, the TMO will commission research to build up our professional knowledge base. In 2010-11, it will undertake four research studies, including selection of suitable tree species for greening, choice of planting medium, wood strength of common tree species in Hong Kong and common biological tree decaying agents in Hong Kong. The research findings will be shared among the tree management departments as well as the industry. We also recognise that this area of work will benefit from exchanges with Mainland and overseas authorities and tree experts and will actively pursue such opportunities. Preparation is under way to set up an expert panel, comprising local and overseas tree experts, for giving professional advice on the policy and operation on tree management as well as preservation and risk mitigation measures for complicated cases on trees.

(C) Enhancement of the Tree Complaint Handling Mechanism and the Emergency Response Arrangement

16. Operating round-the-clock and with the capability to receive public complaints via telephone, email or letter, the Government “1823” Call Centre serves as the central point and an effective platform for the public to lodge tree complaints and enquiries. The “1823” Call Centre also monitors the progress of follow-up action on individual cases and keep complainants posted in the process. The TMO will continue to work with the Efficiency Unit to ensure that tree complaints/enquiries are referred to the responsible departments promptly and followed up in a timely manner.

17. To further facilitate members of the public in making tree reports for follow-up by the responsible tree management departments, the TMO has recently launched a user-friendly tree report form, available on the DEVB’s tree webpage and in paper format, in support of our initiative on community-wide surveillance of trees.

18. For emergency response arrangement, DEVB and the relevant tree management departments have enhanced the procedures for handling emergency tree cases. During the rainy season and in inclement weather, tree management departments will stay vigilant and make contingency arrangements in accordance with the established emergency procedures.

(D) Enhancement of Training to Raise the Professional Standard of the Tree Management Personnel

19. Tree management is a professional task and training is therefore of paramount importance. Pursuant to the recommendations of the Report of the Task Force on Tree Management, the GLTM Section has set up a Training Committee⁷ to assist tree management departments in formulating a training and manpower development strategy in order to ensure that they are equipped with adequate quality staff at the managerial, supervisory and frontline levels for the competent discharge of the full spectrum of tree management responsibilities. Apart from enhancing training provision for Government employees, the TMO will also liaise with local training providers and tertiary education institutions to upgrade the training opportunities available to Government staff as well as the private sector.

20. The TMO is also committed to upgrading the professional level of the industry on tree management. Government departments require the service providers they engage for greening work to provide quality service. The TMO is reviewing the qualification requirements for contractors interested in providing tree management services to Government and will also identify improvement opportunities for the performance management arrangement for contractors so as to encourage the industry to upgrade its service standard in a sustainable manner.

(E) Enhancement of Public Education and Community Involvement

21. The community plays a significant role in our tree management work. As recommended by the Task Force on Tree Management, the TMO will mount a variety of community involvement and public education activities for various target groups to foster an attitude of care for trees across the territory and to appeal to private owners to take proper care of trees within their private lot for the benefit of safety of residents and visitors. These activities include roving exhibition, school talks, seminars for the industry, private owners and property management companies on tree management, etc.

22. To enhance public awareness of tree risk management, the TMO has recently sent leaflets on “Pictorial Guide for Tree Maintenance to Reduce Tree Risks” and “Keep your Trees Safe” to owners’ corporations, mutual aid committees and property management companies of all

⁷ The Training Committee is chaired by the Deputy Secretary for Development (Works) with members drawn from 14 relevant bureaux and departments.

private residential estates in Hong Kong to remind private property owners and property management companies to inspect the trees within their premises before the rainy season so as to minimise risks. About 13 000 leaflets have been sent. We have also uploaded these publications and related information⁸ on DEVB's tree webpage.

ADVICE SOUGHT

23. Members are invited to comment on Government's tree management policy and the measures being implemented under this policy.

Development Bureau
July 2010

⁸ These include leaflets of "Pictorial Guide for Tree Maintenance" and "Do's and Don'ts in Pruning".