

**Reply from the Tree Management Office
in response to the question raised by Dr Hon Kenneth Chan Ka-lok
to the Panel on Development
on ‘Tree Management Policy’**

Tree Management Policy

Over the years the Government has undertaken tree planting widely in both urban and rural areas to increase the greenery of Hong Kong. However, as trees age and grow and urban development continues, the space available for tree growth has reduced, leading to gradual deterioration of health of trees and hence structural stability. In view of this, the Government accords high priority in enhancing tree management and reducing the risk of tree failure to protect public safety.

The Government advocates tree care and preservation. No trees should be felled unnecessarily and inappropriate pruning such as topping or over-pruning should be avoided, particularly for trees with high conservation and landscape values. Departments have to follow the relevant technical circulars and guidelines on tree removal procedures and pruning practices. The current tree risk assessment system adopted by the Tree Management Office (TMO) has made reference to international standards and best practices (e.g. guidelines issued by the International Society of Arboriculture and the *Urban Tree Risk Management: A Community Guide to Program Design and Implementation* published by the United States Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture), and has been considered as an effective tool in screening trees of obvious problems or defects for follow-up mitigation measures. The core tree management departments, including Highways Department (HyD), are equipped with professional teams to oversee their tree management work. Apart from qualified arboricultural professionals (e.g. Arborists and Tree Climbers), other professions, such as architects, landscape architects, engineers, surveyors, etc. may also be involved depending the types of facilities managed by the departments. Some departments will also engage other qualified tree experts to assist in tree risk assessment and maintenance works through outsourcing. Departments will only consider tree removal after professional and objective assessment and when no other effective mitigation measures are deemed feasible, such as pruning, removal of dead branches, pest and disease control, and installation of support system. This is the case of the emergency removal of four stonewall trees on Bonham Road undertaken by HyD on 7 August. HyD has thoroughly reviewed the situation and in the absence of any other feasible mitigation measures and with an impending thunderstorm outlook on the same day, the department arranged removal of the trees to ensure public safety. The detailed report of the incident is available on HyD’s homepage for public reference.

The TMO is reviewing the tree risk assessment regime of government departments and aims to enhance their arrangement in handling problematic trees.

Tree Removal Procedures

The Development Bureau Technical Circular No. 10/2013 on Tree Preservation stipulates the factors of consideration and procedures for tree removal. For trees affected by development, the proponent departments have to apply to the Lands Department with full justifications for tree removal or transplanting, together with compensatory planting proposal. Removal can only be undertaken after approval is obtained. The core tree management departments have generally established their internal vetting mechanisms to review tree removal applications. These mechanisms comprise professional teams responsible for tree management work, including qualified arboricultural professionals to ensure the applications concerned are reviewed with professional assessment.

In the case of emergency where there are no other feasible mitigation measures, departments will arrange timely removal of the trees to protect public safety. Departments will as far as possible make detailed photo records of the trees prior to removal.

Tree Legislation

The Government adopts a prudent and open attitude towards the legislative proposal for mandatory tree inspection on private properties. However, we should be cautious on the enactment of an ordinance on tree management, as there will be significant impact on hundreds of thousands of private property owners. As revealed in the feedback from recent seminars on tree management for private properties, the private property owners and property management companies are primarily concerned with the following issues: their responsibilities in tree management; selection of suitable contractors and professionals; and guidelines. Therefore we will continue to strive to improve the existing system and arrangements on publicity promotion, education, guideline promulgation and information dissemination.

The current priority of the Government is to enhance tree management to protect public safety. To achieve this goal, we have to improve the professionalism of tree management work. This requires practical tasks that cannot be readily resolved by a piece of legislation.

One of the prerequisites for the enactment of an ordinance on tree management is the adequate supply of qualified personnel with relevant

experience to implement the required tree inspection and maintenance works. Although the number of personnel with professional qualifications in arboriculture has grown in recent years in response to market demand, given the huge number of trees in Hong Kong, we still need a large number of tree work personnel with appropriate education attainment, professional qualification and working experience to provide quality service in tree management and maintenance. To improve the service quality, the Government has accorded high priority to working with the industry in further enhancing the knowledge as well as skill and management standards of tree work personnel.

Currently, the TMO is planning a Human Resources and Competences Survey and Analysis of the Arboriculture, Horticulture and Landscape Management and Maintenance Industry. The survey will help guide the planning of capacity building and enhance the professionalism of the industry.

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