

**For discussion on
19 December 2017**

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
PANEL ON ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS**

Setting up the Countryside Conservation Office

PURPOSE

This paper seeks Members' views on the setting up of a Countryside Conservation Office (CCO) under the Environmental Protection Department (EPD); the creation of a permanent post of Administrative Officer Staff Grade C (AOSGC) (D2) to head the CCO which will also be responsible for the nature conservation policy; and to utilize the \$1 billion earmarked by the Government to take forward the relevant conservation and revitalisation work, as well as minor improvement work.

WORK OF THE CCO

2. Remote areas in the countryside are rich in ecological, architectural and cultural resources. To protect the natural ecology of the countryside and revitalise the architectural environment of villages, the Chief Executive announced in her 2017 Policy Address that a CCO would be established to coordinate conservation projects that would promote sustainable development of remote countryside. In parallel, the Government has earmarked \$1 billion for such conservation and revitalisation efforts, as well as minor improvement works. These actions will not only conserve our precious natural and cultural resources, bringing new life to the almost desolate remote countryside, but also promote sustainable economic activities such as eco-tourism, thereby responding to the community's aspirations for urban-rural symbiosis.

Conservation and Revitalisation Efforts

3. In regard to the conservation and revitalisation work, the CCO will co-ordinate collaboration of the departments concerned, and provide an integrated and dedicated mechanism with resources for the conservation and sustainable development of the remote countryside in the long run, with a view to preserving the natural environment, enhancing the local biodiversity and promoting the sustainable development of the remote villages. The CCO plans that half of the \$1 billion mentioned above, i.e. \$500 million, will be dedicated to funding the relevant conservation efforts, as well as supporting non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and villagers to organise diverse and innovative conservation activities or projects based on an interactive and co-operative approach. For instance, the long-term conservation and revitalisation of certain areas may adopt an approach similar to that of the Nature Conservation Management Agreement (MA) Scheme¹ currently funded by the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF). By encouraging villagers and NGOs to co-operate in agricultural rehabilitation (e.g. recultivation of rice paddies or orchards) or rehabilitation of artificial wetland at suitable locations, the ecosystems of remote countryside can be rehabilitated, with the traditional culture and custom revived and preserved. Where circumstances permit, the rich natural and cultural resources in remote countryside can be utilised for planning some “in-depth” travel focusing on the ecological conservation, geological exploration and cultural experience. Moreover, the CCO may, as necessary and appropriate, follow the Government’s established procurement to engage contractors to take forward necessary conservation initiatives.

4. We will set up an advisory committee (AC) comprising non-official members including non-government stakeholders such as scholars, professionals, rural/district stakeholders and green groups. The main duties of

¹ Under the New Nature Conservation Policy, the ECF provides funding support to NGOs for implementing projects under the MA Scheme. By providing financial incentives, the Scheme encourages the collaborative participation of landowners, NGOs and the private sector in preserving not the only 12 priority sites for enhanced conservation but also country park enclaves and private land within country parks. The 12 priority sites are Ramsar Site, Sha Lo Tung, Tai Ho, Fung Yuen, Luk Keng Marsh, Mui Tsz Lam and Mau Ping, Wu Kau Tang, Long Valley and Ho Sheung Heung, Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site, Cheung Sheung, Yung Shue O and Sham Chung.

the AC are to examine applications on the relevant conservation and revitalisation work (not including minor improvement work) submitted by NGOs and monitor the implementation of approved projects and proposals. The CCO will consult the AC on the scope of and application procedures for conservation and revitalisation projects.

Minor Improvement Works

5. We plan to spend the remaining provision of \$500 million on minor improvement works in remote countryside, and priority will be given to the areas with conservation value. The CCO will explore suitable minor improvement works for public facilities, such as providing or improving footpaths and trails, watercourse management, public lightings, public toilets, sewage improvement facilities and waste recycling facilities. Having regard to the overall conservation needs, the CCO will also consider rehabilitating the existing architectural environment in the countryside through, for example, working in conjunction with the villagers in considering to refurbish the representative structures. Funding for these minor works will be sought by the CCO according to the established procedures.

Scope of Conservation Initiatives

6. As a priority, the CCO will enhance countryside revitalisation in Lai Chi Wo, as well as ecological conservation in Sha Lo Tung, and will keep under review the implementation of these initiatives and their effectiveness from time to time, with the aim of extending the initiatives progressively to other remote countryside areas. Taking conservation needs, cultural resources and district integrity into account, the CCO will explore and examine, in consultation with the AC, the key remote countryside areas to be covered by the initiatives, such as the 12 priority sites for enhanced conservation under the New Nature Conservation Policy as mentioned in footnote 1.

Lai Chi Wo

7. Lai Chi Wo is one of the most intact and established “walled-village” in Hong Kong, and it has a Hakka culture dating back to 300 years ago and long-established rice cultivating history. Lai Chi Wo has great ecological value. There are fung-shui wood, country park, marine park and a natural mud flat with

special scientific interests surrounding it. In collaboration with various NGOs, the Government has earlier carried out various re-cultivation and revitalisation projects, as well as minor improvement works to rehabilitate the ecological, cultural and architectural environment in Lai Chi Wo. The initiative has the support of many villagers, and is well received by the community.

8. Building on the rehabilitation achievements made in Lai Chi Wo, the CCO will enhance relevant conservation and revitalisation efforts, such as organising diverse and innovative projects and activities in co-operation with villagers and NGOs, or engaging contractors to implement conservation initiatives. Specifically, these efforts and initiatives include assisting villagers in agricultural rehabilitation, rehabilitating abandoned orchards, removing *Mikania micrantha*, strengthening the conservation of freshwater ecosystems through recultivation of rice paddies or rehabilitation of artificial wetland at suitable locations; encouraging universities, NGOs and villagers to join hands in organising diverse and innovative activities (e.g. in-depth tours focusing on ecology, geology, agriculture and Hakka cultural experience) by integrating the unique Hakka traditions of Lai Chi Wo Village with the overall natural environment and cultural resources; conducting embankment works, desilting works and fish ladder construction at existing natural rivers or streams of high ecological importance to enhance not only their drainage capacity but also their aquatic ecology and biodiversity; exploring the implementation of sewage improvement measures under which natural self-purification methods that are both innovative and cost-saving will be adopted for improving the sewage treatment facilities of public toilets; enhancing existing infrastructure such as waste recycling facilities; and exploring rehabilitation of representative structures in collaboration with the villagers.

Sha Lo Tung

9. The area of Sha Lo Tung has abundant biodiversity and ranks second amongst the 12 priority sites in terms of its importance of ecology. Sha Lo Tung has rich vegetation, clear streams and marshes which offers an important habitat for a multitude of butterflies, fireflies, freshwater fish, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and birds. It is the breeding ground for some species with much conservation concerns, for example, it has been supporting over 60 per cent of local species of dragonflies, which include a number of rare, endangered and

endemic species. It enjoys a reputation for having marshes and streams among woodland and being a sanctuary for dragonflies.

10. For the purpose of the long-term conservation of Sha Lo Tung, the Chief Executive in Council gave in-principle agreement in June 2017 to pursue a proposal for the contemporaneous surrender of private land with high ecological importance in Sha Lo Tung to the Government and granting of a piece of land at the Shuen Wan Restored Landfill in Tai Po to the Sha Lo Tung Development Company Limited (the non-in-situ land exchange). It is the Government's plan that upon official completion of the non-in-situ land exchange, we will take over the conservation of Sha Lo Tung. To ensure long-term conservation of the ecologically important habitats there, we have to put the site under active conservation management as early as possible. Monitoring and control actions will be stepped up to prevent damage to the unique habitats, and efforts will be made to progressively restore the original fresh water wetland and ecosystems. At natural rivers or streams of special scientific interest, undesirable vegetation growth will be removed with blocked river channels cleared to improve the water flow and restore the original ecosystems. Footpaths and trails will be built with greener methods to facilitate accessibility by villagers and also conservation of the environment as a whole.

STRUCTURE OF CCO

Proposed Creation of an Assistant Director of Environmental Protection (ADEP) Post

11. We propose to create a permanent AOSGC permanent post (D2) with the title of ADEP (Nature Conservation) (ADEP(NC)) in the EPD to lead the CCO. Other staff in the CCO includes 27 non-directorate personnel from various professional (including Town Planner, Architect, Engineer, Landscape Architect, Forestry Officer, Liaison Officer and Environmental Protection Officer) and non-professional grades. They will carry out effective co-ordination, planning, execution and supervision of various initiatives; provide secretarial and technical support to the proposed AC; and facilitate villagers in developing suitable sustainable economic activities, such as assisting them in the application for licences for catering and tourist accommodation.

12. Being an AOSGC post in the EPD, ADEP (Nature Conservation & Infrastructure Planning) (hereafter referred to as “ADEP(CI)”) is currently in charge of the work on nature conservation policy, as well as responsible for pursuing food waste management strategies and overseeing the planning and implementation of infrastructure projects on waste recycling. However, with the rapid development of various waste recycling infrastructure like the Integrated Waste Management Facilities and organic resources recovery centres and food waste management strategies, plus the higher importance placing on nature conservation and request of our society (such as Hong Kong’s obligation in fulfilling the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora as well as the formulation and implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan), ADEP(CI) is having much difficulty in dealing with these policies together. Therefore, we propose that duties related to nature conservation policy be split from the portfolio of ADEP(CI) and put under the purview of the proposed post of ADEP(NC), to be filled by an AOSGC. Apart from heading the CCO as mentioned in paragraph 11 above, ADEP(NC) will also be able to implement the inter-related nature conservation policies and countryside conservation projects in a focused and comprehensive manner. This arrangement will also be beneficial for the formulation and implementation of nature conservation policy. Besides, we propose to retitle ADEP(CI), originally an AOSGC post, to ADEP (Waste Infrastructure Planning) (hereafter referred to as “ADEP(WIP)”), which will now be a post of the departmental professional grades. ADEP(WIP) will be responsible for pursuing food waste management strategies and overseeing the construction and planning of waste recycling infrastructure, and shall thus possess relevant professional knowledge.

13. The job description of the proposed ADEP(NC) is at **Annex 1**.

Non-directorate Support

14. The proposed ADEP(NC) post will be supported by a team of 30 non-directorate civil servants, including 27 non-directorate posts proposed to be set up in the CCO and three existing non-directorate EPD officers in charge of nature conservation policy. We plan to establish the CCO in 2018/19 as soon as possible in accordance with the established mechanism and all other directorate and non-directorate civil service posts. The structure of the CCO is at **Annex 2**. The Secretariat of the CCO will provide secretariat service for the AC to be set

up and responsible to assist the AC to examine and monitor the projects initiated by the NGOs. The Works Branch will be responsible for design, building and monitor of various minor works, and the Planning Branch will be responsible for the planning, studying and coordinating various departments and carrying out the relevant conservation works, as well as providing technical support and assisting villagers to implement relevant sustainable economic activities, such as the application for licences for catering and accommodation.

Alternatives Considered

15. We have critically evaluated whether the duties of the proposed directorate post to be created could be absorbed by existing ADEPs within the EPD and concluded that it will not be viable to redeploy these existing directorate officers to take up additional duties in relation to the CCO without prejudicing the delivery of policy initiatives under their respective heavy portfolios. The organisation chart of the EPD after creation of the proposed post is at **Annex 3**.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

16. The above proposal involves the following additional expenditure:

- (a) create a permanent AOSGC (D2) post to lead the CCO to implement various nature conservation policies and countryside conservation projects (para. 11). The proposed creation of the post will bring about an additional notional annual salary cost at mid-point of \$2,094,600. For the new non-directorate posts supporting the CCO, the additional notional annual salary cost at mid-point will be \$17,519,000 (para. 14);
- (b) Non-recurrent expenditure of \$500 million to carry out conservation works and to support co-operation between NGOs and villagers (para. 3); and
- (c) Capital works expenditure of \$500 million to carry out minor improvement works (para. 5).

ADVICE SOUGHT

17. Members are invited to comment on the proposal as set out in the paragraphs above.

**Environment Bureau/Environmental Protection Department
December 2017**

Job Description
Assistant Director of Environmental Protection (Nature Conservation)

Rank: Administrative Officer Staff Grade C (D2)

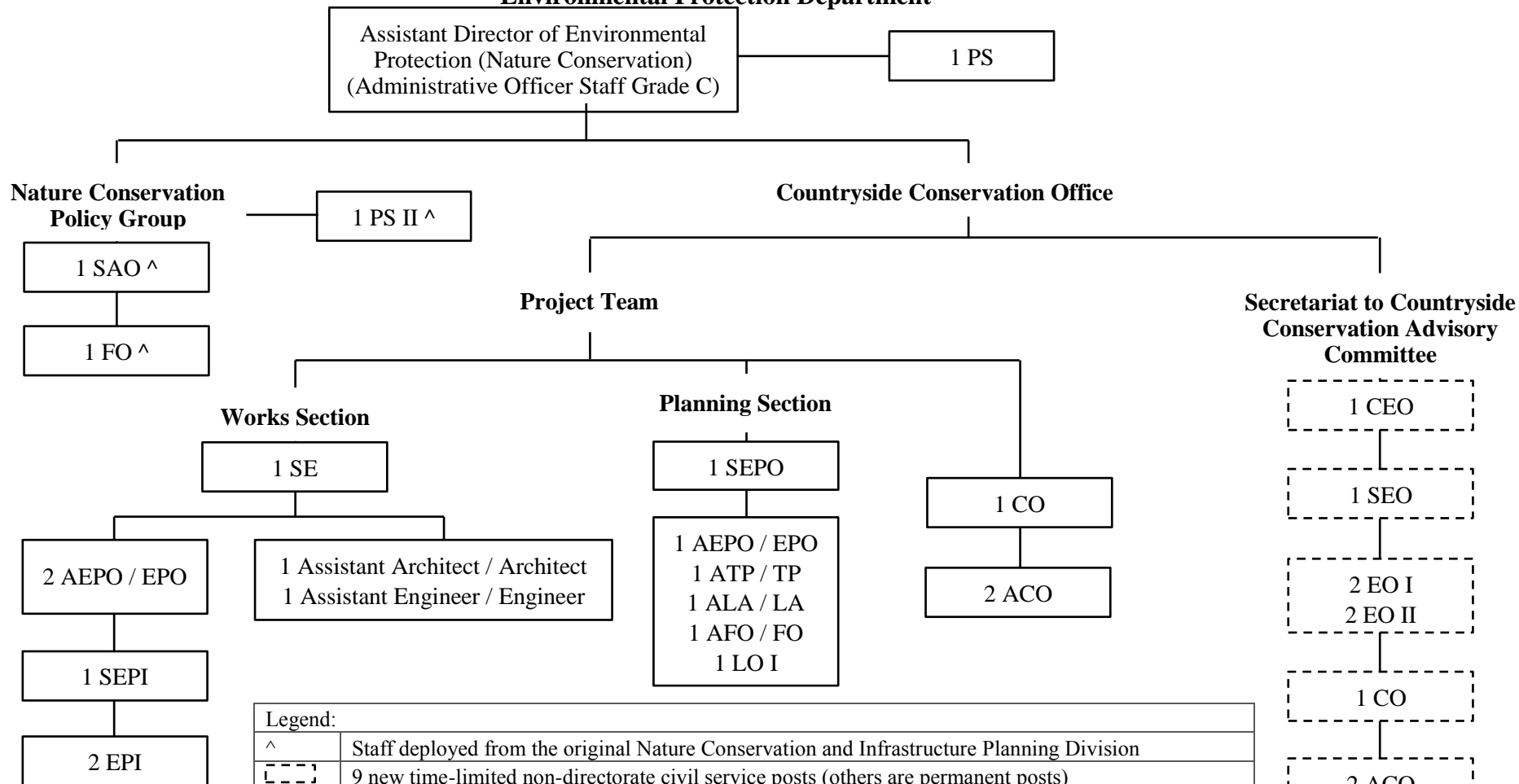
Responsible to: Deputy Director of Environmental Protection (2)

Main Duties and Responsibilities:

1. To formulate and oversee the implementation of policies relating to nature conservation including conservation of biological diversity, protection of major habitats and protection of endangered species;
2. To review and examine proposals on conservation designations including country parks, special areas, marine parks and marine reserves, and to deal with related policy matters;
3. To review and propose amendments to related legislation as appropriate;
4. To deal with housekeeping matters of the conservation arm of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department;
5. To fulfill Hong Kong's obligations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, and to implement the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan;
6. To head the Countryside Conservation Office in co-ordinating countryside conservation projects for enhanced preservation and sustainable development of remote countryside. Details include:
 - To plan, implement and supervise various minor improvement works as well as conservation and revitalisation initiatives;

- To liaise and co-ordinate with Government bureaux and departments, other organisations as well as relevant trades and stakeholders for collaboration in such projects and initiatives;
- To monitor the use of funds approved and the financial management of such projects;
- To provide secretarial and technical support to the proposed Advisory Committee; and
- To facilitate villagers in developing suitable sustainable economic activities (such as assisting them in the application for licences for catering and tourist accommodation).

**Organisation Chart of Nature Conservation Division (including Countryside Conservation Office),
Environmental Protection Department**



Legend:			
^	Staff deployed from the original Nature Conservation and Infrastructure Planning Division		
[---]	9 new time-limited non-directorate civil service posts (others are permanent posts)		
SE	Senior Engineer	TP	Town Planner
SEPO	Senior Environmental Protection Officer	ATP	Assistant Town Planner
EPO	Environmental Protection Officer	SAO	Senior Administrative Officer
AEPO	Assistant Environmental Protection Officer	CEO	Chief Executive Officer
SEPI	Senior Environmental Protection Inspector	SEO	Senior Executive Officer
EPI	Environmental Protection Inspector	EO I	Executive Officer I
FO	Forestry Officer	EO II	Executive Officer II
AFO	Assistant Forestry Officer	LO I	Liaison Officer I
LA	Landscape Architect	ACO	Assistant Clerical Officer
ALA	Assistant Landscape Architect	CO	Clerical Officer
		PS	Personal Secretary

Organisation Chart of Environmental Protection Department after Creation of the Proposed Post

