

LCQ13: Tree management

Following is a question by the Hon James To and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, in the Legislative Council today (October 22):

Question:

Following a fatal accident caused by the collapse of an old tree in Stanley at the end of August this year, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD") and a number of other government departments have immediately stepped up its tree inspection work. However, some people and organisations have criticised LCSD for the lack of transparency in its tree inspection and removal work, as well as its unsatisfactory performance in the caring of trees. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the relevant details of the big trees removed by the Government since January 1 this year (please set out the details in the table below);

Location of the tree	Whether the tree was listed on the Register of Old and Valuable Trees ("the Register")	Responsible department	Date of removal	Reasons for removal
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(b) as there have been reports that while only two old trees were removed because of their potential hazards in the past four years, LCSD has advised that at least four old trees need to be removed upon completion of its recent inspection of those trees on the Register which are within its purview, whether the sudden rise in the number of trees required to be removed is due to LCSD recently raising the safety standards for trees and adopting a different method for inspecting trees;

(c) whether it will consider making public the health condition of the trees on the Register on a regular basis, so as to enable the public to understand the Government's work in the caring of trees and monitor its performance;

(d) among the LCSD staff responsible for inspecting the health condition of trees, of

the respective numbers of those holding various relevant professional qualifications; whether the Government has issued guidelines or established standards for assessing the health conditions of trees; if so, the details of such guidelines and standards; and whether the Government will consider increasing the manpower for tree inspection or outsourcing some of the work, so as to support its policy of enhancing urban greening; and

(e) as it has been reported that LCSD will review its existing work in the caring of trees, of the progress of the review, as well as when the details are expected to be made public (e.g. whether consideration will be given to enacting legislation on the preservation of trees)?

Reply:

President,

(a) The departments responsible for managing trees in Hong Kong include the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), the Highways Department, the Housing Department, the Architectural Services Department, the Drainage Services Department, the Water Supplies Department, etc. Since the beginning of 2008, a total of 17 trees on the Register of Old and Valuable Trees (the Register) have been removed. Nine of them were blown over or severely damaged during typhoons while the others had to be removed as they posed hazards of collapsing. Please refer to the Annex for details of the trees removed.

(b) There are about 510 trees on the Register, of which about 490 are managed by the LCSD. Between 2004 and 2007, a total of three trees on the Register were removed due to the potential hazards posed, while four other trees that were severely damaged in typhoons or rainstorms were also immediately removed.

Since last year, the LCSD has set up an expert group comprising local tree experts to enhance the level of expert consultation in the management of trees. Moreover, after the tree collapse incident on August 27 this year, the LCSD adopted a prudent approach by immediately re-inspecting the trees on the Register under its management. In order to enhance and speed up the inspection work, the LCSD further enlisted the help of US tree experts. According to the inspection results, nine trees on the Register were deteriorating in health (three of which had been severely

damaged during typhoons). After thorough examination and consultation with the local tree expert group, it was confirmed that there was no other feasible way to sustain the healthy growth of these trees. Owing to their potential hazards of collapsing, they should not be retained. The LCSD removed these trees on public safety grounds. Most of the other trees on the Register have generally maintained healthy growth. Some of them require basic care treatment, such as the application of insecticide, pruning of withered branches, installation of cable bracings on tree trunks, etc. The LCSD has already started the necessary work, and would continue to monitor the growth of these trees and the progress of their care treatment such that appropriate measures can be taken.

Starting from last year, the LCSD has enhanced the participation of local and overseas tree experts in its management of trees to enhance its tree management work. There have been more typhoons this year than in the past few years, and the force of the typhoons this year has also been much stronger, inflicting comparatively more severe damages on a greater number of trees than in previous years.

(c) The photographs of the trees on the Register and relevant information on the trees species have been uploaded onto the webpage of the Register managed by the LCSD. Since the beginning of this year, the LCSD has been updating the Register after each tree removal from the Register to keep the public informed of the reasons and the dates of the removal. In conjunction with the tree expert group, the LCSD will review ways to enhance the transparency of information on the Register to enable the public to have a better understanding of the health condition of the trees.

(d) The Tree Team of the LCSD has a strength of some 110 staff who are charged with tree management work. Moreover, district staff of the LCSD and horticultural contractors also provide routine plant caring and maintenance services. Staff in the Tree Team have all been trained before taking up their work. The training they have received includes attendance at courses on horticultural and tree maintenance provided by the Training Section of the LCSD. Topics like tree inspection, pruning, fertilisation, pest control, reinforcement of trunks, etc. were covered in their training courses. Furthermore, officers at the supervisory level of the Tree Team have attended training courses on arboriculture conducted by overseas experts. Some LCSD's staff have also been sent overseas to attend courses on arboriculture and have obtained the relevant qualifications. At present, 40 of the LCSD's staff have received their certified arborist qualifications awarded by the International Society of Arboriculture.

The Administration introduced an online manual on greening in 2004 for reference by all departments. Reference materials on caring of trees have been included in the manual. Relevant departments have also issued guidelines on caring of trees to their staff according to the requirement of individual cases. We will step up our tree caring work and enlist the assistance of tree experts as and when necessary.

(e) The LCSD reviews its tree inspection and maintenance work from time to time for continuous improvement. At the present stage, the LCSD will focus its efforts on the necessary tree caring work and conduct a review in conjunction with the tree expert group on ways to enhance the transparency of information on the Register. It is our aim that that more information on the old and valuable trees will be provided on its webpage by early next year. In addition, the LCSD will also step up training for its staff.

Ends/Wednesday, October 22, 2008