

LCQ11: Caring of trees

Following is a question by the Hon Vincent Fang Kang and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, in the Legislative Council today (December 3):

Question:

I have received complaints from members of the public alleging that a number of old trees were unnecessarily removed by the authorities immediately after a fatal accident caused by the collapse of an old tree in Stanley on August 27 this year. Regarding the Government's efforts in caring of trees, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the total number of trees removed, which were aged 20 years or above, by various departments since the above tree-collapsing accident; whether the number has increased when compared to that of the same period last year; and among the trees removed, the number of those which had been inspected upon receipt of complaints from members of the public that the trees had problems;

(b) whether the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has conducted any internal investigation into the above tree-collapsing accident; if it has, whether the investigation result indicates any dereliction of duty on the part of its staff or procedural problems; and whether it has, in view of this incident, reviewed the procedure and the time required for handling complaints of the public regarding potential hazards posed by trees;

(c) given that LCSD has a Tree Team comprising 110 staff specially charged with tree management work, of the reasons why tree experts from the United States have been employed to assist in the inspection work, and what professional services have been provided by them; and

(d) whether it will set up a dedicated team or assign one single department to be responsible for coordinating such work as tree inspection, examination and caring?

Reply :

President,

(a) The departments responsible for managing trees in Hong Kong include the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), the Architectural Services Department, the Drainage Services Department, the Housing Department (HD), the Highways Department, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), the Water Supplies Department, etc. Although the Government has kept statistics on the removal of trees with a trunk diameter of over 95 mm, detailed information on the age of the removed trees is not available.

Between September 1 and November 30, 2008, about 2,200 trees were removed by various Government departments, showing an increase of around 1,000 when compared with the same period last year. It was partly because of the need to accommodate certain Government projects carried out between September 1 and November 30, 2008 that more trees were removed during that period of time. Also, Hong Kong was hit by three typhoons or severe tropical storms (when tropical cyclone warning signals No. 8 or above were hoisted) in August and September this year. The number of trees damaged and thus requiring removal was consequently greater than that during the same period last year. Among the trees removed between September 1 and November 30, 2008, about 200 had been inspected upon receipt of complaints from members of the public, which was a decrease of around 30 when compared with the same period last year.

(b) The incident in question is currently sub judice. The LCSD is therefore unable to disclose information relating to the incident. The LCSD is providing full assistance to the Police to facilitate their investigation into the incident.

(c) Apart from seeking assistance and advice from local tree experts after the incident involving the collapse of the tree, the LCSD has further enlisted the assistance of overseas tree experts to inspect about 470 trees under its management on the Register of Old and Valuable Trees, with a view to enhancing and speeding up the inspection work. The Tree Team of the LCSD benefits from the experience of the overseas experts, who are from a company based in the United States, which has had a branch office in Hong Kong for five years. The experts were tasked to assist in the assessment of the conditions of the trees and advise on the necessary care. In engaging the assistance of the overseas experts, the LCSD took into account various considerations, including their professional qualifications and experience, and whether they could provide the service in a timely manner.

(d) The Government adopts an integrated approach in assigning the responsibility for the maintenance of vegetation (including plants and trees) on government land. Under this approach, the department responsible for the maintenance of a facility (such as a park, open space, government building or slope) is also responsible for the maintenance of vegetation there. For example, the HD is responsible for managing trees in public housing estates, the LCSD is responsible for managing trees at their venues and in landscaped areas along public roads other than expressways outside the boundaries of country parks, and the AFCD is responsible for managing trees inside country parks. In order to clearly define the responsibilities of various departments, the Government has issued a set of technical guidelines, stipulating that vegetation in different areas should be managed and protected by the relevant departments. Over the years, the integrated approach has been successful and cost-effective in protecting vegetation and the Government has no plan to assign a single department to be solely responsible for the management of vegetation.

The Government has established a high-level Steering Committee on Greening to steer our greening policy and co-ordinate the efforts of the relevant departments in tree protection and greening. The Steering Committee on Greening is chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Development (Works) with directorate level members drawn from 15 bureaux and departments.

Ends/Wednesday, December 3, 2008