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23 December 2014

Legislative Council
Public Accounts Committee
(Attn.: Mr Anthony CHU)

Dear Mr CHU,

Public Accounts Committee
Consideration of Chapter 6 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 63
Government's efforts in enhancing tree safety

In response to your request for additional information concerning the above Chapter, we have the following response -

Part 2: Coordinating the work of tree management departments

(a)   *According to paragraph 2.8 of Chapter 6 of the Director of Audit Report No. 63 ("the Report"), some departments might not have responded to the 2012 survey conducted by the Tree Management Office ("TMO") to collect tree-related statistics from all government departments, or they were not sure whether they were responsible for tree maintenance. In view of this, what measures will TMO adopt to delineate the responsibilities of the relevant departments for tree maintenance? Will TMO issue standardized guidelines to the relevant departments in this regard?*

To better collect information on trees managed by departments, the TMO has continued the survey on tree-related statistics from government departments every year since 2012. As of 2014, all departments with

trees under their purview have confirmed the survey findings with the TMO.

The TMO agreed with the Director of Audit's recommendations on stepping up efforts to regularly remind non-core departments of their maintenance responsibilities for trees under their purview; and refining the TMO's strategy for coordinating the work of tree management departments; and applying more administrative measures to non-core departments (paragraph 2.11). The TMO has standardised tree management guidelines and disseminated to all departments concerned.

The TMO organises training sessions, such as tree risk assessment training, and invites representatives from all departments involved in tree management to attend with an aim to improve the knowledge of tree management. The TMO has also issued periodic reminders to departments on their duties in tree management. Representatives from all tree management departments were invited to regular briefing sessions which elaborated on the requirements of tree risk assessment, tree management arrangements, guidelines and circulars, etc. Departments are fully aware of their duties in the management of trees within their ambits. The TMO will keep on monitoring the tree management works of the tree management departments and provide necessary arboricultural advice and training to departments.

(b) *According to paragraphs 2.18 and 2.19 of the Report, for cases of disagreement in the interpretation over the delineation of maintenance responsibilities for roadside trees among departments, TMO would review and adjudicate these cases as to which department was responsible for tree management. On average, how long does it take from the onset of such a case to TMO's adjudication? Does the adjudication has binding effect on the departments concerned? What is the compliance ratio of TMO's adjudication by relevant departments?*

The complaints handling procedure for tree related complaints and enquiries was promulgated by the TMO in 2013. According to the procedure, the assigned department should ascertain whether the case is within its responsibility. If a resolution cannot be made at the departmental level, the case will be brought to the TMO for adjudication as mentioned in paragraph 2.21 of the Report. Between 13 August 2013, the implementation of the adjudication mechanism, and 18 December 2014, there were only 6 cases brought up for adjudication. The overall time taken for handling the cases from the onset, i.e. when the department first received the cases that were subsequently referred to the TMO, to the

final ruling made by the TMO ranged from one to eight weeks. Departments which disagreed with the TMO's ruling on tree maintenance responsibilities might appeal. However, the department concerned would still have to follow up the case as assigned until such time the appeal result overturns the TMO's ruling. The above mechanism has been agreed by departments concerned and has a binding effect. As of to date, the TMO's adjudication has all been accepted by the relevant departments.

(c)   *According to paragraph 2.28(a) of the Report, the survey covered roadside areas measuring five metres from the road kerb. On what basis is such specification arrived at? Why is the specification different from the standard used by the Lands Department in conducting its special tree inspection which covers roadside areas measuring 10 metres from the road kerb?*

The purpose of the TMO's roadside tree survey is to have a general understanding of the quantity and quality of roadside trees in areas with high pedestrian and/or vehicular flow in order to facilitate policy considerations on the maintenance approach for roadside trees. The specification was developed based on the consideration that most roadside trees are located within five-metre from kerb in an urbanised setting. As such, it is considered the appropriate scope of the survey, as it strikes a balance among risk, value for money, effectiveness and efficiency. The survey, which was risk-based, has achieved its objective as it has formed the basis for the Development Bureau to develop policy directives. On the other hand, as mentioned in paragraph 2.39 of the Report, the Lands Department's special tree inspection exercise covered village access roads and footpaths on unallocated government land in rural areas in the New Territories.

Part 3 – Tree risk assessment

(d)   *With reference to Table 2 of the Report, how many trees which were under Form 2 inspections were located in Category I, II and III zones respectively?*

With reference to Table 2 of the Report, there are about 6,600 trees each completed with a Form 2 inspection in 2014. Currently the database does not require the categorisation into the tree risk management zones, as the majority of the Tree Basis assessments are conducted in Category I zones.

However, in the current enhancement of the Tree Management Information System (TMIS), we are planning to add the respective tree risk management zones, namely Category I, II and III zones in the proforma of Form 2.

(e) *With reference to Table 3 and paragraph 3.25 of the Report, the standards used by the eight major tree management departments (excluding the Lands Department) to conduct Form 2 inspections on problematic trees identified by Form 1 inspections were different and the number of Form 2 inspections conducted varied significantly among the departments concerned. Has TMO followed up with those departments which conducted no or few Form 2 inspections?*

The TMO agreed with the Director of Audit's recommendation on Form 2 inspections in paragraph 3.39(d) of the Report that more guidelines should be provided to help tree management departments decide on whether and when it is necessary to conduct a Form 2 inspection. As such, the TMO enriched the TRA guidelines accordingly, which were promulgated in October 2014. The TMO has also liaised with the relevant tree management departments that conducted no or few Form 2 inspections, which confirmed that they would conduct Form 2 inspections for problematic trees identified in Form 1 inspections in accordance with the latest TRA guidelines.

(f) *According to paragraph 3.57(a) of the Report, some cases had been outstanding for a long period of time since confirmation of brown root rot infection. Has TMO formulated any targets and/or guidelines for the departments concerned to handle these cases within a designated period of time?*

The 16 trees as mentioned in paragraph 3.57(a) of the Report have all been duly removed.

The TMO agreed with the Director of Audit's recommendation on urging the responsible departments to remove brown root rot (BRR) infected trees in a timely manner (paragraph 3.60 (a)). Further to the guidelines on BRR, the TMO formulated targets for the departments concerned to handle these trees within a designated period of time namely, departments are required to remove BRR infected trees within six weeks from the date of confirmation by the TMO on the presence of BRR disease. In the event that the removal has to take longer time to complete, departments are required to undertake detailed inspection to ascertain the health and structural conditions of the tree and submit the

inspection report to the TMO for review. The TMO will remind departments on a regular basis on the importance of timely handling of BRR infected trees. The TMO keeps track on the process closely and as of to date, there is no overdue BRR cases since the promulgation of the targets in October 2014.

Part 4: Management information systems and databases

(g) *According to paragraph 4.5 of the Report, the Tree Management Information System ("TMIS") had many malfunction incidents which were unresolved, and as a result, another contractor was engaged. Has the Administration made any claims on the original contractor for such loss? If yes, please provide details.*

The anomalies of the system identified during the nursing period in 2013 have been resolved. According to the recent system health check, the TMIS system has no major inherent problem. The service performed by the contractor of the TMIS was suspended in October 2014. The Administration has in accordance with the contract withheld certain payment instalments pending the settlement of the contract. To further enhance the TMIS and provide additional functions to the system, a separate new contract with different scope and functionalities was awarded to another contractor in November 2014.

(h) *According to paragraph 4.9 of the Report, certain departments continued to update tree data in their departmental systems after data conversion without promptly updating the TMIS. Has TMO provided any guidelines to the departments concerned for the compliance of the relevant responsible officers? If yes, has TMO reviewed the situation after the issuance of these guidelines? Is it possible to link up individual departmental systems with TMIS so that tree data could be updated to TMIS automatically?*

The TMO agreed with the recommendations made in paragraph 4.12 (a) of the Report on taking measures to promptly complete the TMIS enhancement project in order to deliver the expected functions and reap the benefits of the TMIS. The TMO is carrying out an enhancement of the TMIS, which includes the development of an interfacing device to allow departments to transfer tree data to TMIS automatically to facilitate the updating of tree data.

To ensure that the enhanced TMIS is properly used by departments, the following will be implemented:
- developing user manuals and guidelines; and
- arranging training workshops for users to familiarise with the new additional functions in the TMIS.

(i) *Accordingly to paragraph 4.23 of the Report, the Tree Register was not equipped with a search function, and members of the public could not easily search for trees at locations where they had concerns. With a view to catering for the general public, does TMO has any plan to develop new user-friendly functions and designs for the Tree Register?*

The TMO agreed with the Director of Audit's recommendation on enhancing the user friendliness of the Tree Register (paragraph 4.26 (b) (i)) and is developing new user-friendly functions including search function for the Tree Register.

Part 5 : Training and community involvement

(j) *According to paragraph 5.9 of the Report, given that TMO used considerable staff resources in delivering training courses, has TMO tracked if attendants of these courses subsequently worked in the field of tree management? Upon completion of these courses, has TMO followed up on their effectiveness?*

First, the TMO has ensured that attendees worked in the field of tree management through the following measures:
- Target groups i.e. staff related to tree management for each training course organised by the TMO, are specified when nomination is being called for from departments; and
- Departments are reminded that only those staff who are involved in tree management work should be nominated to attend the training.

Upon completion of these courses, attendees are requested to complete a course evaluation form so that the feedback and effectiveness of the training courses can be assessed. So far the attendees considered the training courses were very effective in general. Regarding the following up on the effectiveness of the training courses, the TMO holds Training Committee meetings regularly which comprise senior management of tree management departments to review the effectiveness of training course and departments' need on tree management training programmes. That said, the TMO agreed with the Director of Audit's recommendation on delivering tree management training in a more sustainable manner

(paragraph 5.13) and has liaised with training service providers and Civil Service Training and Development Institute as recommended in paragraphs 5.12(a) and (c) of the Report.

Should you have any further questions, please contact the undersigned.

Yours sincerely,

(Dr Lawrence CHAU)
for Secretary for Development

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