

Development Bureau's response to Ombudsman's direct investigation report

Regarding a report released by the Ombudsman today (July 13) on its direct investigation into the handling of complaints involving trees on government land, the Development Bureau (DEVB) expressed its gratitude for the work of the Ombudsman in the direct investigation and accepted the recommendations in the report. A spokesman for the Development Bureau said that the Tree Management Office (TMO) has been proactively implementing a series of improvement measures since early 2022, including reviewing and updating the complaint handling procedure, enhancing co-ordination and supervision work of departments in handling complaints, assisting departments in clearing backlog of complaint cases, setting up a task force and finished with reviewing the existing tree management guidelines, monitoring departments' complaint handling and implementation of mitigation measures, enhancing public education and promotion campaign, etc.

On the recommendations in the report, the TMO and tree management departments have implemented various improvement measures, including:

- (1) The TMO has enhanced the complaint handling procedure, requesting tree management departments to reply to general complaint cases within 14 working days. The TMO has been regularly monitoring the complaint statistics and handling time to ensure complaint cases are dealt with in a timely manner;
- (2) Tree management departments have established internal procedures to monitor the progress of implementation of risk mitigation works; and
- (3) The TMO has been stepping in earlier to assist in mediation and adjudication for complaint cases on which tree management departments have disputes over responsibilities. The TMO has been sharing with tree management departments lessons learnt from dispute cases for departments' reference with a view to reducing future disputes.

The above improvement measures have been implemented progressively with promising results. This year till now, the overdue tree-related complaint cases were reduced by over 90 per cent and the complaint handling time was also shortened.

The TMO and tree management departments will continue to enhance the complaint handling procedure and strengthen communication among departments. Furthermore, the DEVB proposed in January 2023 10 improvement recommendations related to roadside tree planting and maintenance. The recommended measures are being implemented as planned, including updating the Guidelines for Tree Risk Assessment and Management Arrangement for tree management departments to follow in conducting tree risk assessment and management work cycle commencing 2023, and developing guidelines for the application of appropriate

technologies for different tree health/structural issues. Departments have been implementing a systematic programme to replace senescent pioneer species with native species to reduce risk and enhance biodiversity and sustainability. It is anticipated that the above measures would help reduce the number of problematic trees, thereby reducing complaints.

The DEVB and tree management departments will continue to dedicate efforts to managing trees properly, so as to create a green living environment for the community while safeguarding public safety.