

HAD sternly clarifies unfounded allegations by District Councils

In response to recent malicious exaggeration over the working relationship of the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and District Offices with the District Councils (DCs), a HAD spokesman today (December 17) sternly clarified as follows:

The spokesman said, "The HAD and District Offices do not have any intention to suppress the DCs. As always, the HAD and the DC Secretariats have been trying hard to follow-up on various funding proposals raised by DCs and to handle reimbursement claims of various expenses submitted by DC members. But the premise is that we must examine and approve funding according to the established procedures, following the principle of ensuring the effective use of public resources. Under this premise, the co-operation of DCs and DC members is most important, and is also conducive to facilitating our approval decision as soon as possible."

Approval of funding applications for anti-epidemic goods and measures

To fight against the epidemic, the HAD and District Offices fully support anti-epidemic activities and funding applications in the districts. On the distribution of anti-epidemic goods, the HAD has in the past two months provided about 17 million masks to DCs, district organisations, social welfare organisations, voluntary groups, kaifong welfare associations, major community organisations, clansmen associations, Rural Committees etc, for distribution to residents in need. In response to the development of the epidemic, the HAD has also distributed masks, hand sanitisers, etc, to households of housing estates with a number of confirmed cases, such as Block 8 of Kwai Shing West Estate; Richland Gardens in Kwun Tong; Kwai Tung House, Tung Tau Estate in Wong Tai Sin; and Lung San House, Lung Poon Court in Diamond Hill etc. The masks arranged by the HAD for distribution were purchased by the Government Logistics Department following procurement procedures, and hence individual departments or District Offices do not need to go through the procurement procedures. The masks could therefore be arranged for distribution within a very short period of time and no administrative fee has to be paid to any group. This is cost effective and accords with the principle of using public funds prudently.

Moreover, some DCs proposed using public funds under the Community Involvement (CI) Programme to spray anti-virus coating for common areas of private housing estates for free. The HAD has clarified many times that it is willing to provide subsidies on the premise that the principle of co-financing is followed and objective conditions are met (including buildings which the rateable value is not high). This is in accordance with the principle all along adopted by the Government in subsidising private buildings, with the aim to provide support for private buildings with actual needs but lacking resources.

Funding applications involving conflict of interest

Regrettably, the HAD has discovered recently that some funding applications under the CI Programme were anti-epidemic in name only, but actually involved conflicts of interests, and hence they failed to comply with the relevant funding guidelines. For example, an organisation submitted funding applications for anti-epidemic projects totaling over \$4 million to five DCs, and were approved by some DCs. However, the HAD discovered that the person-in-charge of the organisation was employed as an assistant to a DC member when the organisation submitted the applications in January this year. According to the "Manual on the Use of District Council Funds" (Manual), grantees should avoid acts leading to conflicts of interests, and should declare their interests when handling procedures in organising activities that may involve financial or personal interests. The HAD noted that during the vetting process of these applications, some relevant DC members did not make declaration of interest in accordance with the Manual. The person-in-charge of the organisation also did not make any declaration.

Therefore, the HAD is now temporarily suspending the approval and handling of funding applications from the relevant organisation under the CI Programme, and has requested all relevant DCs to make declarations afresh in respect of all applications from the organisation, so as to ensure that potential conflicts of interests and compliant procedures are addressed.

Operating Expenses Reimbursement

On operating expenses, the HAD has clear guidelines on Operating Expenses Reimbursement (OER). The District Offices have been following the Guidelines on the Remuneration Package for Members of the District Councils of the HKSAR (Guidelines) to handle applications for expenses reimbursement. As stipulated in the Guidelines, a DC member must ensure that the ward office operated with the support of the OER and other accountable allowances/expenses reimbursements for DC members is used for the discharge of DC duties. But since the beginning of the sixth-term DC, District Offices have received many problematic OER applications, which require further vetting to confirm that the relevant expenses have been incurred for work compatible with the DC functions, so as to ensure effective and proper use of public money.

Some DC members publicly announced their participation in and the use of their ward offices as polling stations for "primaries" activities. As the HAD stated earlier, the so-called "primaries" did not comply with DC functions and the related expenses would not be reimbursed by the Government. The District Offices had earlier on issued letters to the concerned DC members to ask for the details of their reimbursement applications, so as to weed out the expenses related to the election "primaries" activities from the OER applications and reimburse the remaining part. However, so far only some DC members have submitted further information, and among them, some have submitted incomplete information. As a result, the HAD and the District Offices are unable to handle the large number of reimbursement applications

from DC members involved in "primaries".

DC meetings

In view of the severe epidemic, the Government has implemented special work arrangements for government employees. Except for those involved in the provision of emergency services and essential public services, all other government employees will be arranged to work from home to reduce the flow of people and social contacts in the community. Thus, the HAD earnestly requested respective DCs to suspend or postpone meetings to avoid group gatherings so as to minimise the risk of spreading the virus. Under the District Councils Ordinance and the framework of DC standing orders, video meetings cannot be implemented at present; thus the meetings can only be postponed.

The HAD spokesperson reiterates, "We hope DCs and DC members would not make unfounded and unreasonable allegations. We urge DC members to discuss matters rationally, co-operate with HAD and District Offices in a pragmatic manner, and comply with the District Councils Ordinance as well as the relevant Manual and Guidelines, to work for the well-being of the residents and the districts."