

LCQ2: Public playgrounds for children

Following is a question by Hon Vincent Cheng and a reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Lau Kong-wah, in the Legislative Council today (July 11):

It has been reported that 13 "rocking chairs", play equipment for children located in a public housing estate, were in a dilapidated state, but the Government merely replaced them with the same number of new "rocking chairs". Some members of the public have criticised that such play equipment was monotonous and uninteresting, and the spending of \$210,000 on such equipment appeared to be a waste of public money. On the other hand, one of the tasks of the Commission on Children, which was established by the Government in May this year, is to review the designs of children's playgrounds throughout the territory with a view to making playgrounds more interesting. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will comprehensively review and improve the designs and play equipment of the existing and the newly built playgrounds; if so, of the details and the implementation timetable;

(2) whether it will change the current standardised designs for children's playgrounds under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Housing Department by collecting ideas of creative designs through design competitions or public engagement exercises, so as to introduce in various playgrounds more thematic designs and special features, add play equipment which makes use of various natural materials such as water and sand for provision of sensory experience, as well as introduce play equipment which offers more challenges to children while complying with safety standards; and

(3) as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that a child has the right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and as the findings of an opinion survey conducted by a local group have shown that parents generally consider that the designs of the existing public playgrounds for children have failed to cater for the intellectual and physical development needs of children of different ages, whether the authorities or the Commission on Children will examine if the existing facilities in children's playgrounds are able to cater for this right of the child, and whether they will revise the guidelines for designing playgrounds; if they will, of the details?

Reply:

President,

(1)&(2) The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) manages 640 leisure venues with outdoor children's playgrounds. A "universal play" concept is adopted by LCSD in planning for play equipment with a view to providing inclusive, interesting and innovative play equipment to cater for the needs of children of different ages and abilities and their parents. To

strengthen the appeal to children, themes and popular play facilities such as climbing frames, slides and swings, etc. will also be included in the playgrounds as far as possible. All the facilities have to meet internationally recognised safety standards. In designing facilities for individual venues, LCSD and the relevant works departments will consider topographic features, site area and circumstances and views of the District Councils concerned, etc.

LCSD has been liaising with concern groups on children's play equipment and consulting them and the District Councils concerned on the design and play equipment in children's playgrounds for continuous improvement. To usher in brand new design concepts, LCSD, in collaboration with the relevant works departments, adopted the winning design of the Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas Competition as a prototype to build an innovative inclusive playground in Tuen Mun Park as part of a pilot scheme with inclusion of two natural elements of water and sand in the design. Through sand, water, light and shadow, play equipment that sways and spins, climbing frames and movable parts for knocking and touching, etc., children can enjoy the fun while acquiring different skills which will enhance their physical and psychological development. The inclusive playground in Tuen Mun is expected to open for public use in the third quarter of 2018.

In addition, as a pilot plan, workshops will be held to bring community involvement into the Kai Tak Avenue Park project in Kowloon City to gauge views from children and residents of the area on the provision of play equipment in the project. Suggestions received from the public will be put into practice as far as possible in accordance with government procurement regulations and procedures.

LCSD and the relevant works departments will summarise and draw reference from experiences gained from the above-mentioned pilot scheme and community involvement. Concern groups and organisations, as well as District Councils will be further consulted with a view to considering adopting the same approach in other suitable locations and projects.

In addition to focusing on the hardware of playgrounds, LCSD also organises themed fun days in playgrounds with various organisations to encourage active participation by families in games and activities, thereby energising public parks. Activities organised last year included "Storm the Park Days" featuring frisbee, painting, water play, model car, etc. and Orienteering@Park in large public parks.

According to information provided by the Transport and Housing Bureau, the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) will provide recreational facilities for users of different age groups, including children's playground facilities, in its public rental housing (PRH) estates under the concept of "communal play areas". For example, HA will try to integrate children's playground facilities with other facilities, such as elderly fitness facilities, Tai Chi gardens, pavilions, etc., in the same recreational area to enable adults who need to take care of their accompanying children to use the recreational facilities together in the same area.

HA has all along been adopting a pragmatic approach and fulfilling international safety standards when designing children's playground, and has been selecting materials that are durable and easy to maintain. Whenever feasible, HA will also conduct public engagement activities to collect stakeholders' views on individual proposals of playground facilities. HA will also conduct reviews and opinion surveys one year after flats intake of new PRH estates.

Furthermore, in order to maintain a comfortable, healthy and safe living environment for the residents of PRH estates, HA and the Estate Management Advisory Committees (EMACs) will, from time to time, gauge the views and needs of the residents and stakeholders in order to continuously improve the children's playgrounds and other estate facilities. Where possible, HA will also replace or upgrade various kinds of playground facilities at appropriate locations.

Through meetings of the EMACs, resident representatives and other stakeholders, including local District Council members, can participate in reviewing the need for replacing the playground facilities in the estates. HA will consider various factors when replacing the playground facilities, including changes in the demographic structure of individual estate, conditions of the existing facilities, environmental limitations, future maintenance and repair issues, etc., in order to install suitable facilities to address the needs of the residents.

(3) As mentioned above, LCSD is committed to providing diversified play equipment at its playgrounds for children of different ages and abilities to help them attain a balanced development of mind and body, enhance their interaction with others and stimulate exploration of the surroundings through acquiring different skills by the play equipment.

Most of the children's playgrounds under LCSD provide play equipment for groups of children aged between two and five as well as five and 12. In addition, play facilities of inclusive design are available at a number of children's playgrounds (e.g. Quarry Bay Park and Sha Tin Park) for the enjoyment of children with or without disabilities. Diverse types of play equipment are installed at the venues, including tactile play panels and movable parts in different shapes suitable for visually-impaired children, movable parts that produce sounds when knocked, as well as transfer platforms or ramps that help children using wheelchairs to use facilities and allow them to join other children in playing with these facilities. These facilities enable children with or without disabilities to play and grow up in a harmonious and happy environment and promote their physical and psychological development.

LCSD will draw reference from overseas examples, bring in more community involvement and work in close collaboration with the relevant works departments with a view to providing more innovative, challenging and inclusive play equipment in planning children's playgrounds in large public park projects and renovating the play equipment at children's playgrounds in major public parks to meet the needs of children.