

LCQ4: District football teams

Following is a question by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan and a reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui, in the Legislative Council today (July 15):

Question:

It has been reported that two district football teams respectively from Yuen Long and Tai Po announced earlier their withdrawal from the current football season of the Hong Kong Premier League (HKPL), thus leaving only one district football team competing for the HKPL champion. This situation has aroused concerns about the development and prospect of district football teams. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has taken the initiative to gain an understanding of the reasons for the withdrawal of the aforesaid two district football teams from the HKPL;

(2) whether it knows the minimum annual funding needed for the continued operation of a district football team which participates in the HKPL; whether it has assessed if the existing financial and other support for district football teams are adequate, and whether it has formulated plans to create new sources of income for such teams; and

(3) whether it has plans to comprehensively review the role and functions of district football teams in promoting local football development?

Reply:

Acting President,

To promote district football development, the Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA) invited all 18 districts in 2002 to establish district football teams (district teams) to participate in the then newly-formed Third Division League. In the 2002/03 football season, there were 12 participating district teams; in the 2003/04 football season, the remaining six district teams also joined the Third Division League. Many of the district teams were subsequently qualified for promotion to higher divisions of the league and have achieved very good results.

Since the 2011/12 football season, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) has implemented the District Football Funding Scheme (DFFS) to provide funding support to the 18 district teams participating in the HKFA league with the aim of improving their performance and governance, strengthening the cohesion of the community and fostering greater enthusiasm for football at the district level. The funding can be used to cover key expenses in areas including hiring coaches, renting training venues, transportation, purchasing team strips, purchasing necessary equipment for competition or training,

engaging administrative staff, purchasing public liability insurance and accident insurance in connection with local and overseas training and competitions, as well as hiring physiotherapy services. However funding under the DFFS cannot be used to cover players' salaries. The amount of funding for each team is determined by the division of the HKFA league in which it is participating. Currently, the levels of funding for teams playing in the HKPL, First Division, Second Division and Third Division are \$1.65 million, \$0.55 million, \$0.385 million and \$0.33 million respectively.

My reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(1) The HKFA has originally scheduled to hold the HKPL matches between August 2019 and May 2020 in the 2019/20 football season. Due to impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the HKPL matches have been suspended and postponed since March 23, 2020, with resumption no earlier than August this year. In view of the special circumstances of the pandemic, the HKFA allows the HKPL teams to decide on their own whether to continue playing in the HKPL matches upon its resumption.

The HAB and the District Offices have been in close contact with district teams to understand their situation. It is noted that Best Union Yuen Long and Wofoo Tai Po have decided not to participate when the HKPL matches in the 2019/20 football season resume and would only compete in the First Division League in the 2020/21 football season, having considered relevant factors such as the impact of the pandemic, downward pressure on the economy, football clubs' financial status and issues relating to sponsors.

(2) Being the highest level of professional football in Hong Kong, the HKPL requires all participating teams to operate as professional teams and meet the licensing requirements of the HKFA. It is different from other divisions of the league in terms of competitiveness and nature. Just like any other professional team, district teams have to take into account various factors, such as their level of competitiveness, development plans and aims as well as financial arrangements, in deciding whether to compete in the HKPL. The annual operating costs of football teams playing in the HKPL have increased in recent years, ranging from several millions to tens of millions of dollars.

In the 2019/20 football season, there were 10 teams competing in the HKPL, including three teams with district background, i.e. Kwoon Chung Southern, Best Union Yuen Long and Wofoo Tai Po. In addition to an annual funding of \$1.65 million per team under the DFFS, district teams playing in the HKPL are provided with 36 sessions (54 hours in total) of free venues for training in their respective districts by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department in each football season. District teams are independent legal entities which run their own affairs, including financial arrangements. Irrespective of whether it is a district team or not, the costs of competing in the HKPL vary from one team to another. Depending on the team's planning and targets, the various cost items such as players' salaries, local and overseas training and competitions, as well as promotion and marketing costs can vary significantly. In general, football clubs need to develop their income sources and seek sponsorship to maintain their commercial operation

and competitiveness.

(3) District teams are established to compete in local leagues with the aim of enhancing enthusiasm for football at the districts and strengthening cohesion of the community. District football teams have indeed made contributions to the development of youth training and the nurturing of young football players. In the 2002/03 and 2003/04 football seasons, all 18 district teams started from the lowest level, i.e. the Third Division League. The district teams have become stronger, with many of them qualifying for promotion to higher divisions of the league and winning numerous championships. In the 2019/20 football season, there are three district teams playing in the HKPL, six in the First Division, six in the Second Division and three in the Third Division Leagues.

In the past decade, all 18 district teams have taken root in local districts and made positive contribution to football development in Hong Kong. Regardless of the division of league they are participating in, district teams have, apart from contributing significantly in enhancing the interest and enthusiasm in football in their respective districts, provided training and competition opportunities for many young players, some of whom have even been selected as members of the Hong Kong Team and Hong Kong Youth Team. In general, district teams help improve the standard of play of and participation in football in Hong Kong.

The HAB regularly reviews the funding levels of the DFFS. Since the 2018/19 football season, the funding levels have been increased by 10 per cent. Upon completion of the 2019/20 football season, the HAB will review the reports submitted by district teams and determine the funding levels for the 2020/21 football season. The HAB will continue to support district teams and promote district football development through the DFFS.