

LCQ4: Tree management

Following is a question by the Hon Lam San-keung and a reply by the Secretary for Development, Ms Bernadette Linn, in the Legislative Council today (November 6):

Question:

At present, the nine core tree management departments of the Government maintain trees within their respective facilities and boundaries in accordance with the relevant requirements and guidelines, while the Tree Management Office (TMO) co-ordinates the tree management work of various government departments in an integrated approach. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether there is mechanism requiring government departments to notify TMO or the government departments concerned to carry out maintenance work when they discover potential risks posed by trees not under their purview, so as to prevent the trees from posing risks to members of the public; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) apart from calling the one-stop service hotline 1823, whether there are other channels for public transport operators to seek assistance when they find trees posing danger to vehicles on the road or blocking road signs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) after members of the public lodge complaints about trees with potential risks by calling 1823, how long will it take for the Government to ascertain which department is responsible for maintaining the trees in question, and how long will it take for the department concerned to deal with the trees in question; whether the Government has set clear service indicators in this regard, and of the collaborative mechanisms among various government departments?

Reply:

President,

There are a vast number of trees across the territory of Hong Kong. The Government adopts an "integrated approach" for managing trees on government land, under which the department responsible for maintaining a government facility or site takes care of the trees within the area. The Tree Management Office (TMO) of the Development Bureau (DEVB) formulates overall tree management strategies and measures, and co-ordinates and oversees the tree maintenance efforts of government departments at the central level.

Regarding each part of the question raised by the Hon Lam, my reply is as below:

(1) The tree management departments are responsible for the maintenance of trees located on their facilities or land. If a department considers that a tree requiring attention falls outside its jurisdiction, it will refer the matter to the appropriate department for handling, or make a referral through the TMO of the DEVB to ensure that the tree in question is properly addressed. Moreover, the DEVB conducts regular co-ordination and working meetings with departments to oversee and steer the implementation of tree management initiatives. During these meetings, departments engage in practical exchanges, clarify the division of responsibilities among them, and share the challenges they have encountered in tree maintenance, while learning from the valuable experiences of one another to enhance the effectiveness of tree management.

(2) In daily tree maintenance work, the tree management departments regularly inspect trees along public roads under their jurisdictions. If branches are found extending onto the roadway, obstructing vehicle passage, hindering driver visibility, affecting traffic lights or signs, or posing a potential risk to vehicles, the departments will promptly arrange for the necessary pruning or removal of the trees to ensure the safety of road users.

The TMO and core tree management departments have established a regular communication mechanism with key public transport agencies. The public transport operators can also report tree issues to the Government through the 1823 hotline. For example, bus companies will inform the tree management departments on the locations of problematic trees. The departments may conduct joint inspections with the bus companies as needed, and implement the necessary tree maintenance measures.

In addition, the TMO and tree management departments hold regular liaison meetings with the MTR Corporation Limited and the Peak Tramways Company Limited to exchange views on tree maintenance issues along the rail and tramway.

(3) In September 2023, the TMO of the DEVB consolidated and updated the Guidelines for Handling Tree-Related Complaints (the Guidelines), to include a series of new measures, such as updating the complaint processing mechanism, enhancing co-ordination and overseeing of departments managing tree complaints, and assisting departments in addressing backlog cases, with a view to expediting handling of tree-related complaints.

For cases that pose an imminent danger or are classified as urgent, the responsible department must take immediate action to ensure public safety. For general tree cases, the department will respond to the public enquiries within 14 working days, stating the investigation results, the relevant tree work to be undertaken, and the estimated timeline for completion. In accordance with the Guidelines, if the case involves tree removal, the department is required to complete the work within four weeks of the response, while tree pruning should be completed within eight weeks.

Upon receiving tree cases referred by the 1823 hotline, if a relevant tree management department considers that the case is outside its

jurisdiction after review, the department must submit a referral to another department through the 1823 hotline within seven working days in accordance with the Guidelines, and provide supplementary information to support their viewpoint, including site inspection records, tree location, site photographs, etc. If the department fails to submit the referral request via 1823 within the specified seven-day time frame, it will be responsible for handling the complaint and responding to the complainant to avoid delays in processing the case.

When disputes arise regarding the responsibilities of tree maintenance among departments, and the responsible department cannot be confirmed by the 1823 hotline, the 1823 will escalate the case to the TMO of the DEVB for handling. The TMO will review the situation and conduct mediation, make a decision within seven working days of receiving the escalated case and notify the responsible department, which must respond to the complainant within 14 working days.

Following the promulgation of the new Guidelines until September this year, about 99 per cent of cases were properly handled upon referral to the relevant departments, while the number of cases requiring reassignment by 1823 and adjudication of tree management responsibilities from the TMO accounted for only about 0.9 per cent and 0.1 per cent respectively, of the total complaint cases. The average handling time for general cases has significantly reduced from 60 days in 2022 to five days in 2024. We hope that these figures show that the enhanced complaint handling mechanism has a positive and significant effect.