

Old and Valuable Tree in Fan Leng Lau Pleasure Ground removed by LCSD

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) today (April 24) removed an Old and Valuable Tree (OVT) with a potential risk of collapse in Fan Leng Lau Pleasure Ground to ensure public safety.

The tree being removed was a *Ficus microcarpa* listed on the Register of OVTs (registration number LCSD N/12) with a height of 13 metres.

The LCSD had been closely monitoring the tree's health and structural condition, and the tree's health was found to be declining since 2016 with four major branches supporting the tree crown being removed or collapsed due to fungal infection and inclement weather. Though the LCSD had taken immediate mitigation measures to preserve the tree, including crown cleaning and application of organic mulches and fungicides, the health condition and structural integrity of the tree continued to deteriorate and posed a risk of collapse.

Having consulted the North District Council, the Urban Forestry Advisory Panel and the Greening, Landscape and Tree Management Section of the Development Bureau, the LCSD removed the tree today and will replant one *Pterocarpus indicus* at the location.

A spokesman for the LCSD reiterated that the department will continue to adopt a prudent approach in inspecting and managing trees under its care. Removal of problematic trees will be undertaken only when no other viable risk mitigation measure is available.

LCQ17: Strengthening measures to improve people's livelihoods

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Tik Chi-yuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (April 24):

Question:

The Government has repeatedly indicated that the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance will render Hong Kong's business environment more stable, which is conducive to economic development, and that the Government will make every effort to improve people's livelihoods upon completion of the legislative exercise for the Ordinance. In this connection, will the

Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has estimated the growth in Gross Domestic Product and the number of employment places in the coming three years;
- (2) as it is learnt that carers are currently facing heavy life stresses and the existing support cannot really help them resolve their difficulties, how the Labour and Welfare Bureau will strengthen the support provided to carers through economic improvement; and
- (3) as it is learnt that there has been no significant improvement in the problem of disparity between the rich and the poor in Hong Kong, how the authorities will introduce more targeted poverty alleviation measures through economic improvement?

Reply:

President,

Following the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance officially taking effect on March 23, Hong Kong has put up a shield and strengthened the defensive wall of its national security under the transition from chaos to order, allowing its efforts to be focused on pursuing economic growth, advancing development, improving people's livelihoods and bringing fulfilment to the people.

In consultation with the Office of the Government Economist, the reply to the three parts of the question raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) In February this year, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region forecast that the Gross Domestic Product would grow by 2.5 per cent to 3.5 per cent in real terms in 2024. For the period from 2025 to 2028, the forecast trend growth rate is 3.2 per cent per annum. The sustained economic growth will support local labour demand and create more jobs.

(2) On providing financial support to carers, the Government has since October 2023 regularised the following four financial assistance schemes under the Community Care Fund:

(i) the Scheme on Living Allowance for Carers of Elderly Persons from Low-income Families;

(ii) the Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities;

(iii) the Special Care Subsidy Scheme for Persons with Severe Disabilities (Special Care Subsidy); and

(iv) the Scheme on Providing Subsidy for Higher Disability Allowance Recipients in Paid Employment to Hire Carers (Scheme to Hire Carers).

The monthly allowance of the two Subsidy Schemes for low-income carers has been increased from \$2,400 to \$3,000; the monthly full grant of the Special Care Subsidy has been increased from \$2,000 to \$2,500; and the monthly allowance of the Scheme to Hire Carers is \$5,000. The above financial support involved an annual funding of about \$527.5 million. The eligibility criteria for the carer allowances, which mainly subsidise low-income carers, are already more lenient than those of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme, which provides assistance to those in financial need. To ensure the proper use of public money, the Government will review in due course the implementation of various financial assistance schemes/subsidies upon regularisation, and make adjustments as and when necessary.

(3) The Government has devoted sustained efforts to improving social welfare and introducing new measures on social security, elderly services, rehabilitation services, child care, family support, youth support, etc. Among others, the Government has been allocating more and more resources in the form of cash assistance on initiatives for improving people's livelihood, alleviating poverty and supporting the disadvantaged. Taking social welfare expenditure as an example, the estimated recurrent expenditure in 2024-25 has added up to \$127.4 billion, accounting for 22.0 per cent of the estimated total recurrent government expenditure. This represents an increase of over 50 per cent (56.2 per cent) within five years when compared with \$81.5 billion in 2019-20.

With a rapidly ageing population in recent years, the overall workforce has started to shrink, thereby hampering the momentum of economic growth. There are views in society that the underprivileged face more difficulties than just low income, and that the Government's cash assistance alone may neither address their needs fully nor solve the poverty problem in the long run. Instead of relying on "giving out cash" solely, the Government should implement targeted poverty alleviation by teaching people how to stay out of poverty (empowering those who are able to help themselves) and providing assistance to needy and special groups (supporting those who are unable to help themselves).

The current-term Government has adopted a strategy of targeted poverty alleviation by directing resources to those most in need. The Commission on Poverty (CoP) supports the Government's targeted poverty alleviation strategy. Based on the Government's statistics and by making multidimensional analyses of household characteristics, employment and income situation, coverage of government cash benefits, living environment, rental burden, burden of supporting dependants, etc, the CoP has identified three groups for targeted poverty alleviation, namely households residing in subdivided units (SDUs), single-parent households and households with elderly members only (including singleton, doubleton and three-person-and-above elderly households). The CoP also agrees that a two-pronged approach should be adopted to address the specific needs of different target groups. In other words, the Government should on the one hand empower those who are able to help themselves (such as SDU households and single-parent households) to achieve self-reliance and improve their lives, thus releasing the potential

labour force of society, and on the other hand continue to plug existing service gaps to support those who are unable to help themselves (such as households with elderly members only). The Government has implemented various targeted poverty alleviation projects catering to the needs of the target groups. These projects include:

(i) Implementing the Strive and Rise Programme – Through tripartite collaboration of the Government, the business sector and the community, focused support is given to secondary students from underprivileged families, particularly those living in SDUs;

(ii) Launching the Pilot Programme on Community Living Room – Through tripartite collaboration of the Government, the business sector and the community, the Pilot Programme provides SDU households with additional living space and help them establish interpersonal networks, thereby enhancing their living standard and sense of belonging to the community;

(iii) Rolling out the School-based After School Care Service Scheme – Primary students in need (especially those from single-parent families) can stay at school outside school hours for care and learning support, thereby enabling their parents to go to work; and

(iv) Engaging District Services and Community Care Teams with Tsuen Wan and Southern Districts as pilot points – Elderly households in need can be identified through visits or contacts, and referred to relevant social welfare service units for follow-up.

The Government will review the experience accumulated in each of the targeted poverty alleviation projects and examine their effectiveness to decide the way forward, with a view to carrying on related work in an in-depth and systematic manner.

LCQ21: Compensation for pneumoconiosis and mesothelioma

Following is a question by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (April 24):

Question:

The Pneumoconiosis and Mesothelioma (Compensation) Ordinance (Cap. 360) seeks to establish a scheme for compensating persons or their family members in respect of incapacity or death resulting from pneumoconiosis or mesothelioma (or both) and to formulate plans for purposes connected

therewith. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of patients suffering from pneumoconiosis or mesothelioma who received "compensation for care and attention" under Cap. 360 in each of the past five years, and the amounts involved;

(2) as it is learnt that only 18 patients are currently receiving the compensation mentioned in (1), which represents a significant deviation from the number of persons who are genuinely in need of such compensation, and many patients suffering from pneumoconiosis or mesothelioma and their caregivers have relayed that the patients fail to attend a medical assessment because they are in extremely poor physical condition and even need to be totally bedridden, resulting in the failure of the Pneumoconiosis Medical Board to conduct medical assessments, whether the Government knows the relevant situation; if so, whether it has recommendations for improvement, including but not limited to arranging for outreach medical practitioners to conduct an on-site medical assessment for such patients, relaxing the eligibility criteria for receiving such compensation, and increasing compensation items in order to provide compensation for the caregivers of such patients;

(3) as under Cap. 360, patients may claim reimbursement of outpatient medical expenses at a maximum daily rate of \$300, and the maximum daily rate of reimbursable medical expenses for their inpatient and outpatient treatment received on the same day is \$370, some patient groups have pointed out that such compensation limits were last adjusted by the Government in early 2018, and the relevant compensation limits can no longer reflect patients' actual medical expenses, whether the Government will raise the compensation limits concerned to compensate patients for their medical expenses; and

(4) as some patient groups have pointed out that Cap. 360 does not allow patients to make claims for reimbursement of medical expenses on medical consultations sought on the Mainland, but many patients have travelled between the Mainland and Hong Kong seeking medical consultations in recent years, whether the Government will allow patients suffering from pneumoconiosis or mesothelioma to make claims to the Pneumoconiosis Compensation Fund Board for reimbursement of medical expenses on medical consultations sought for such diseases on the Mainland?

Reply:

President,

The Pneumoconiosis and Mesothelioma (Compensation) Ordinance (PMCO) provides compensation for persons who are determined by the Pneumoconiosis Medical Board (PMB) as suffering from pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma, resulting in incapacity or death and their family members. The compensation includes compensation for incapacity; compensation for pain, suffering and loss of amenities; medical expenses; and compensation for care and attention.

In consultation with the Department of Health, my reply to the Member's

question is as follows:

(1) The number of pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons receiving compensation for care and attention, and the amount of such compensation paid according to PMCO in the past five years are provided below:

Year	Number of persons	Amount of compensation
2019	12	\$672,750
2020	16	\$1,050,148
2021	17	\$984,907
2022	17	\$867,823
2023	15	\$830,100*

*The figure is subject to final auditing.

(2) In accordance with PMCO, pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons may request PMB to conduct medical examinations on them to determine the degree of incapacity and eligibility for compensation for care and attention, etc. Pursuant to PMCO, these persons may also request further medical examinations by PMB to determine whether the results of the last examinations have changed. PMB is an independent statutory board established under PMCO, with members comprising an Occupational Health Consultant or a Senior Occupational Health Officer or an Occupational Health Officer and two registered medical practitioners appointed by the Director of Health. Based on the results of medical examinations of pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons, including the results of suitable tests and clinical examinations as well as other relevant information, PMB will, according to its professional medical judgement, determine whether these persons have met the eligibility criteria stipulated under PMCO for payment of compensation for care and attention. Besides, when the medical conditions of pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons are stable, non-emergency ambulance transfer service could be arranged, if necessary, for such persons to travel to and from specified places to undergo medical examinations.

Following the established mechanism, the Government adjusts the levels of compensation (including compensation for care and attention) once every two years. The Government has commenced a new round of review, and plans to consult the Labour Advisory Board on the results and recommendations of the review in the fourth quarter of this year and then report to the Legislative Council Panel on Manpower.

(3) PMCO provides that pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons are entitled to the medical expenses in respect of medical treatment as is reasonably necessary in connection with the diseases concerned, subject to the maximum daily rates. According to the established mechanism, the maximum rates are linked to public healthcare service fees and charges. Based on the prevailing public healthcare service fees and charges, the maximum daily rate reimbursable under PMCO for in-patient or out-patient treatment is \$300,

while that for in-patient and out-patient treatment received on the same day is \$370. Under the existing mechanism, the maximum daily rates of medical expenses prescribed by PMCO should be able to cover the necessary expenses on consultation, treatment, medicines, hospitalisation, etc. in public hospitals or clinics incurred by pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons.

(4) According to PMCO, if pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons receive medical treatment outside Hong Kong, and such medical treatment is given lawfully in accordance with the laws of that place and Hong Kong by a medical practitioner or Chinese medicine practitioner registered in Hong Kong, the medical expenses on medical treatment in relation to the above diseases are payable to the pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons.

The Government will review the levels of compensation and coverage of protection under PMCO in a timely manner to ensure that PMCO suits the needs and circumstances of pneumoconiosis and/or mesothelioma persons.

Report No. 82 of the Director of Audit

Report No. 82 of the Director of Audit on the results of value for money audits was tabled in the Legislative Council this morning (April 24).

Value for money audit is an examination into the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which any bureau of the Government Secretariat, department, agency or other public body has discharged its functions. Report No. 82 of the Director of Audit covers a variety of subjects on the administration of government programmes and provision of public services.

Report No. 82 comprises the following eight chapters:

Chapter	Subject
1	Customs and Excise Department's efforts in facilitating trade and promoting economic development
2	Emergency dental services and elderly dental care support
3	Gifted education
4	Hongkong Post: Development of business
5	Provision and monitoring of Rehabus services
6	Support measures for agricultural industry by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
7	Upgrading and operation of San Wai Sewage Treatment Works
8	Work of Countryside Conservation Office

Report No. 82 of the Director of Audit on the results of value for money audits is available on the Audit Commission's website at www.aud.gov.hk.

Property owner fined over \$1,450,000 for not complying with removal orders

A property owner was convicted and fined over \$1,450,000 in total at the Tuen Mun Magistrates' Courts last week for failing to comply with removal orders issued under the Buildings Ordinance (BO) (Cap. 123).

The case involved several dozen unauthorised structures with a total area of about 12 000 square metres on a lot in D.D. 107, Yuen Long. As the unauthorised building works (UBWs) were carried out without the prior approval and consent from the Buildings Department (BD), three removal orders were served on the owner under section 24(1) of the BO.

Failing to comply with the removal orders, the owner was prosecuted by the BD and was fined a total of \$1,457,100 by the Court, of which \$1,157,100 was the fine for the number of days that the offence continued, upon conviction at the Tuen Mun Magistrates' Courts on April 19.

A spokesman for the BD said today (April 24), "UBWs may lead to serious consequences. Owners must comply with removal orders without delay. The BD will continue to take enforcement actions against owners who have failed to comply with removal orders, including instigation of prosecution, so as to ensure building safety."

Failure to comply with a removal order without a reasonable excuse is a serious offence under the BO. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$200,000 and one year's imprisonment, and a further fine of \$20,000 for each day that the offence continues.