

(Information Paper)

**Progress Report of the 14th Meeting of
the Kowloon City District Council**

Purpose

This paper aims to report on the major issues discussed at the 14th meeting of the Kowloon City District Council (KCDC) on 12 January 2006.

Issues Relating to Foreign Domestic Helper (FDH) Agencies

2. Members expressed concern over the fact that currently consumers had to approach the foreign consulate on their own to check whether a particular FDH agency was authorised to arrange for citizens from its home country to work overseas, which would indirectly encourage unauthorised FDH agencies to do business outside their scope. Members were informed that on the importation of domestic helpers from Mainland China, the Mainland and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region governments had agreed in advance to designate certain labour service companies to handle applications from Mainlanders for working in Hong Kong. Members suggested that the Government should first reach consensus with foreign countries in a similar way and then publish the particulars of the authorised FDH agencies in order to provide potential employers with all the necessary information.

3. The Economic Development and Labour Bureau (EDLB) explained that any employment agency which had obtained a licence from the Labour Department (LD) could, in principle, bring people from different countries to work in Hong Kong. At present, different countries had different administrative arrangements. Some countries including India would designate certain FDH agencies to handle applications for overseas employment. The administrative measures adopted by these countries, however, were not the responsibility of Hong Kong. In the Mainland, for instance, the authorities alone could decide through which labour service companies Mainland workers could apply for working here. As such, the LD could not incorporate the administrative arrangements of these countries into the licensing system for employment agencies. If employers wanted to enquire which of the existing FDH agencies were duly authorised by their home countries to act as intermediaries for the employment of FDHs, they could directly contact the foreign consulates concerned in Hong Kong. To give the public easy access to such information, the EDLB was holding discussions with the consulates of those countries which had implemented the above administrative arrangements to seek their agreement for publishing information

on ways to enquire about their respective authorised FDH agencies on the LD Website. The Philippine and Indonesian governments were considering releasing such information on their websites.

Enhancing the System of Product Labelling

4. Members were briefed by the EDLB on the existing legislation which required that certain products should be accompanied by prescribed information. It was understood that if product labelling requirements were extended to all products on the market, the public might have to pay higher prices due to increased production costs.

Praising Hong Kong Police for the Professionalism They Demonstrated in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Protests

5. Since the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) had to prevent terrorists from harming political figures attending the WTO Conference while exercising restraint in dealing with protesters from around the world, it was, among government departments, the one under the heaviest pressure. Although the HKPF had accomplished its mission in the end without members of the public being hurt or shops being attacked, some front-line police officers had sustained physical injuries and the HKPF as a whole had been subject to unjustified criticisms. To boost the morale of the police officers, Members moved a motion to praise the HKPF, which they thought was the pride of Hong Kong. After deliberation and putting the matter to a vote, the meeting passed the following resolution:

“The KCDC thanked the HKPF for faithfully performing its duty to maintain peace and order during the WTO Ministerial Conference, contributing to the smooth conduct of this international event.”

International Festival of Inclusive Arts 2006

6. Members noted that the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) would hold a week-long International Festival of Inclusive Arts from 3 December 2006 to raise public interest in, and awareness of, the concept of “inclusion”. The meeting resolved to support the event and asked the Working Group on International Day of Disabled Persons under the KCDC to follow up with the HWFB on ways of co-operation.

Improving the Service Quality of the Lok Ma Chau (LMC) Control Point

7. Members pointed out that there were a number of conveyor belts at the LMC Control Point standing idle for some time, and there were no ramps in the coach park to facilitate the moving of large hand-carry luggage. Furthermore, screens that were supposed to show the parking locations of cross-border buses did not always displayed the information. As such, Members urged government departments concerned to improve the services of the LMC Control Point as soon as possible.

8. The Immigration Department (ImmD) explained that the LMC Control Point was originally designed as a small border checkpoint. To cope with the growing number of cross-boundary passengers, the Government had carried out improvement works for the LMC Control Point. Upon completion of the works in September 2003, the capacity of the LMC Control Point had increased to 35 000 people per day. However, the daily average number of travellers going through the Control Point was already up to 120 000 in 2005. After the improvement works, there were a total of 10 escalators at the facility. Records showed that three escalators were out of order for a short time due to minor mechanical faults, but all were back in service now. Another three escalators were temporarily out of service since the steps had been damaged by foreign objects and did not comply with the safety requirements as set out in the Code of Practice on the Design and Construction of Lifts and Escalators issued by the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department. The LMC Management Committee, which consisted of the ImmD, Customs and Excise Department and HKPF, was actively looking at remedial measures in conjunction with consultants and contractors.

9. The Transport Department (TD) said in response that it had asked its New Territories Engineering Division to construct a ramp in the coach park at the LMC Control Point as soon as possible. Since the cross-border bus parking location information system was managed by the HKPF, TD staff would notify it in case of system breakdown. The TD held regular meetings with the LMC cross-border bus operators to, among other things, ask them to remind drivers to input their bus registration numbers into the system after parking their vehicles. The public were

encouraged to report to the TD for follow-up action if the parking locations for some buses were found frequently not displayed.

Serious Problem of Youngsters Abusing the Comprehensive Social Security Allowance (CSSA) Scheme and More Assistance to Pregnant CSSA Recipients

10. Members expressed concern over the large number of youngsters living on CSSA despite an upturn in the Hong Kong economy. Members called upon the administration to give assistance and encouragement to those youngsters who were able to get back on their feet and leave the ranks of CSSA recipients. Moreover, Members were also concerned that the CSSA for women granted by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) was not sufficient to cover the unexpected expenses incurred by female CSSA recipients during pregnancy. In view of the fact that the current special allowance granted during the “four weeks before and six weeks after delivery” might not suit individual needs, Members urged the SWD to review the existing arrangements.

11. In response, the SWD said that since pregnant CSSA recipients were not suitable for work before and after delivery on medical grounds, they were eligible for a higher allowance, the amount of which was equivalent to the higher CSSA standard rate for health impaired persons, for a certain period before and after the expected date of delivery. The SWD added that it was rare for CSSA recipients in single-parent families to get pregnant again and such a situation was also not encouraged. For mothers with one child in single-parent families, since they already enjoyed a higher standard rate equivalent to that for health impaired persons for caring the child, the allowance during the “four weeks before and six weeks after delivery” would remain unchanged. However, if CSSA recipients could not meet the unexpected expenses for some particular reasons, such as special food and medication needed during pregnancy, SWD could help them to apply for funds which can provide additional financial assistance for pregnant women in single-parent families. As regards the assistance to teenage CSSA recipients, the Government had studied the issue at policy level. In the meantime, the SWD would continue to help these youngsters better

prepare themselves for the labour market and remove them from the ranks of CSSA recipients through the existing Support for Self-reliance Scheme, the Intensive Employment Assistance Project and other permanent employment assistance services.

Addressing the Problem of Street Obstruction by Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs)

12. Members reflected that at some ATMs mounted on walls outside the banks, queues would form if there were too many users waiting, thereby causing street obstruction. As such, Members suggested that the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) should require banks to install ATMs inside their branch offices.

13. The HKMA explained to Members that its role was to regulate the banking services provided by banks, but not their mode of operation. Nevertheless, the HKMA would reflect Members' views to the banks concerned so that the problem would be resolved as soon as possible. Currently, many banks had installed ATMs that provided 24-hour services, and some of the ATMs installed in the early stage were mounted on walls outside the banks. If such ATMs were to be removed and installed inside the banks, ATM users would be much inconvenienced by disruption of service during the transition period. Since only a few ATMs had so far caused the street obstruction problem raised by Members, the HKMA would continue to monitor the situation and discussed with the banks concerned ways to improve the placement of their ATMs in phases.

Eliminating Telecommunications Blind Spots to Safeguard the Safety of Hikers

14. Members were concerned that the limited coverage of mobile phone networks in the rural areas would make it difficult for hikers to seek help via mobile phones in the event of accidents. In addition, at some locations in the bordering areas of Hong Kong and the Mainland where the mobile phone network signals from the Mainland were too strong, local mobile phone calls made on the Hong Kong side would inadvertently switch to the Mainland networks and then be connected back to the Hong Kong networks using the roaming services, thus costing the callers

unnecessary charges.

15. The Office of the Telecommunications Authority (OFTA) explained that given the existing technology and servicing costs, the Government currently did not require telecommunications service providers to extend the coverage of their mobile phone networks to every corner of the rural areas. However, in view of the recent spate of accidents in the rural areas, the OFTA had actively examined with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and telecommunications service providers the possibility of setting up mobile phone base stations in the country parks. Furthermore, the OFTA had uploaded information about the telecommunications blind spots already identified to its website and the AFCD website for the information of the public. The OFTA was addressing the problem of telecommunications blind spots in the rural areas through the following measures:

- (1) To lease land to telecommunications service providers at a nominal rent of \$1 to facilitate the setting up of mobile phone base stations in the rural areas;
- (2) To co-ordinate the placement of mobile phone base stations of various telecommunications service providers and encourage them to build communal base stations to share the costs;
- (3) To use satellite communications on a trial basis to fill the current void in mobile phone network coverage;
- (4) To continue to have fixed emergency telephones linking to police stations installed at appropriate locations in the country parks;
- (5) To continue to provide information about the telecommunications blind spots in the rural areas on its website, and publish leaflets on ways to seek help in such areas if mobile phones failed; and
- (6) To issue guidelines to inform hikers which types of walkie-talkies they could use to supplement their mobile phones without having to obtain a licence.

Free Rice Distribution during Yu Lan Festival

16. Members noted that there was a consensus between the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and the Yu Lan Festival organisers that while the traditional custom of free rice distribution was to be preserved, such activities should be regulated in order to improve the overall arrangements. In future, the organisers had to fully comply with the first three requirements set out in the guidelines on free rice distribution issued by the HAD. They were 1) rice distributed to each person should not exceed one kilogram; 2) no cash or other gifts should be given out; and 3) sufficient third party insurance should be taken out. It was also recommended that, depending on the scale of the activities, the organisers should adopt the remaining four proposed measures, namely, provision of seating, deployment of security guards to keep order, seeking assistance from volunteers and provision of first aid services.

The 2006-07 Budget

17. Given that the Government's budget deficit would be eliminated earlier than expected owing to a reviving economy, Members urged the Government to consider reducing income tax to ease the financial pressure on the public. Other recommendations put forward by Members included:

- (1) To grant additional education allowance to families with children who did not go to public or subsidised schools;
- (2) To carry out the outstanding works projects of the former Urban Council in Kowloon City District at an early date; and
- (3) To build an integrated clinic in the district as soon as possible.

Kowloon City District Office
March 2006