

Major Item discussed at the 4th Meeting of the Kowloon City District Council

Purpose

This paper aims to report on the major issues discussed at the 4th meeting of the Kowloon City District Council (KCDC) on 29 May 2008.

Consultation Document on Health Care Reform

2. Given an aging population and escalating medical costs, the Government has the responsibility to review the medical system in Hong Kong with the ultimate goal of exploring a safe and sustainable supplementary financing option which would enable citizens to continue to enjoy quality public healthcare services.

3. It was suggested by some Members that the Government should, before considering a financing option, carry out reforms on the existing healthcare system including:

- (a) to further streamline the structure of the Hospital Authority so as to strictly control the operating expenditure and reduce a waste of resources, thus enhancing its cost-effectiveness;
- (b) to inject more resources to strengthen the fundamental work of improving the physical condition of citizens, increase the public's awareness of health, promote the concept that prevention is better than cure, all of which will help address the problem at source and reduce the demand for healthcare services;
- (c) to expand the cooperation between public and private healthcare service sectors and divert the demand of the public to private sector in order to reduce workload of public hospitals as well as support the healthy development of the private sector; and
- (d) to introduce formalised health insurance schemes and measures like tax relief for expenses incurred in such schemes so as to encourage the public to purchase insurance.

Several Members, however, were of the view that the overburdening of the Government by medical expenses had become an imminent problem. Based on the result of public opinion surveys, which showed that more members of the public were

in favour of the social health insurance plan, the Government should consider the mainstream option and achieve an early implementation of the proposed medical reform.

Meeting with the Postmaster General

4. The Postmaster General briefed Members about the postal facilities in the district and the mode of operation of Hongkong Post (HKP) when attending the meeting of the KCDC. He also took the opportunity to draw Members' attention to the extent of damage of mailboxes in some old buildings and urged them to assist the property owners concerned to carry out repairs. Members expressed that HKP, operated as a Trading Fund, had an excellent record of performance. Despite the need to take accountability for its own profits or losses and to survive the competition with private organizations, HKP deserved praise as it could not only generate an annual return of 8.4% on Average Net Fixed Assets as required by the Government, but also maintain the postage rate at a reasonable level over a long period of time. In regard to the target of developing HKP into the Government's convenience store, Postmaster General won fervent support from Members, who also suggested that meanwhile as banks kept reducing the number of branch offices, HKP should grasp the opportunity and study the possibility of providing certain bank services for further development.

Concern about Toxic Plastic Bottles

5. Members showed deep concern over the safety of plastic bottles sold in the market. In fear that Bisphenol A could cause harm to human health, they called for the Government to consider banning the sale of such products. In response, the Department of Health explained that, under normal circumstances, plastic bottles would only release a little amount of Bisphenol A and hence, no dangers would be posed on human bodies. The current research also gave no concrete evidence proving that plastic containers with the substance would constitute immediate dangers on the public. For this reason, the World Health Organisation remained prudent and had yet to advise a ban on the sale of the products. The Customs and Excise Department also said that recent sample testing on plastic bottles and containers available in the market showed that the amount of Bisphenol A released while they were in use met the safety requirements.

Review of Policy on Large-scale Clearance of Illegal Structures

6. Members pointed out that irregularities of arrangements for the clearance of illegal structures were observed, such as in the enforcement action taken by offices in

different districts and in the priorities of demolition of illegal structures. In addition, the Building Department (BD) should accord due attention to some unreasonable acts including disregard for problems arising from clearance, demands on property owners to remove structures erected for security and safety purposes, issue of removal orders to innocent owners, demands on owners to clear structures on rooftop area illegally occupied for use by others, and failure to provide assistance to owners who could not afford the cost of clearance in compliance with court orders. To solve the said problems, Members suggested the Government to consider the following proposals:

- (1) to set up a fund to sponsor owners who fail to establish the owners' corporation or have difficulty in raising fund for demolition of illegal structures;
- (2) to prepay the cost of clearance with money in the fund for premises without receivers or successors or those managed by people who refused to raise money for maintenance work and then recover the sum and interests payable by way of placing a charging order on the property concerned;
- (3) to take serious actions against estate agents and property owners who let or sell illegal structures; and
- (4) to consider setting up an interdepartmental working group to help resolve problems related to clearance of illegal structures and maintenance because such problems always involve the work of various government departments.

7. The BD informed that the current policy on clearance of illegal structures endorsed by the Executive Council in April 2001 was formulated upon a community-wide public consultation exercise. The arrangements were made after taking into account of and striking a balance between the views collected. In keeping with constant changes of society, the BD would consider the views of the general public on the policy and conduct reviews in due course. The BD issued removal orders to demolish illegal structures erected on rooftops in accordance with the Buildings Ordinance, which provided clearly that a removal order should be sent to the owner of the premises where an illegal structure was erected or that of the adjacent premises. Hence, there existed no double standard as alleged. To his understanding, minor works such as installation of window canopies and rooftop fences were alterations commonly found. However, under the current Buildings Ordinance, these minor works would still be regarded as unauthorized building works if no prior approval of the Building Authority (BA) was obtained. To meet the need of society, the BD tabled Buildings (Amendment) Bill 2007 to the Legislative Council in December 2007 for the purpose of incorporating a minor works control system into

the Buildings Ordinance. It was proposed that the carrying out of relatively simple, small-scale and low-risk minor building works would no longer require the prior approval of building plans from the BA. Owners can appoint technical personnel of different qualifications in accordance with the complexity of the works, say, common household minor works only required the appointment of authorized persons. The new control system would facilitate compliance by the public and relevant parties, thus helped tackling the long-standing problems of minor unauthorized building works.

Kowloon City District Council Secretariat
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