

DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF PARKS AND GARDENS

Executive Summary

1. Parks and gardens are recreation open space for the public. According to the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines (HKPSG), the standard for the provision of open space in urban areas is a minimum of 2 square metres (m²) per person, apportioned as 1 m² per person for district open space and 1 m² per person for local open space. The open space may be developed by the public or private sector. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) is primarily responsible for the development and management of public open space and purpose-built recreation facilities. A large part of the open space is landscaped as the LCSD's parks and gardens. As at 31 December 2012, the LCSD managed 1,503 parks and gardens with a total area of 973 hectares (ha). The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review to examine the LCSD's development and management of its parks and gardens.

Planning and provision of park and garden facilities

2. The LCSD's parks and gardens account for half of the open space provision. The other half is provided in non-LCSD venues (e.g. public housing estates and private residential developments). Audit noted that the LCSD might have difficulties in readily collecting comprehensive information on open space in non-LCSD venues for planning the provision of park and garden facilities. Audit analysed the provision of open space as at November 2008 and found that the overall provision in the territory was 2.6 m² per person. However, at the district level, there were shortfalls in open space in 11 districts, i.e. overall shortfalls in 2 districts, and shortfalls in either local or district open space in 9 other districts (paras. 2.6, 2.7 and 2.11).

3. Audit examined 10 recent park/garden projects. In six projects, when the park/garden facilities were opened to the public, considerable time (ranging from 5.5 months to 13.5 months) had elapsed since the target dates of works completion. The long lead time for commissioning parks and gardens may fall short of the public expectation (paras. 2.20 and 2.21).

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4. In 2000, the LCSD took over the Kwai Chung Park development project at a restored landfill site of 27 ha. The LCSD had explored different development options, but with little progress. Only a bicycle park of about 4 ha was completed at the site in 2009. As at December 2012, further development had not yet commenced for the rest (about 23 ha) of the site (paras. 2.27 to 2.29).

5. The Home Affairs Department (HAD) also provides recreation and leisure facilities (e.g. sitting-out areas) in districts. The HAD and the LCSD reached an agreement that some 170 facilities would be transferred to the LCSD with effect from 1 January 2007. To enable the LCSD to better manage and maintain the facilities, they should be designated as public pleasure grounds under the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132). As at December 2012, the designation of 55 of these facilities remained outstanding. Audit's site inspections of such facilities showed that there were cases of suspected abuse/misuse of the facilities (paras. 2.36, 2.38 and 2.39).

Inspection and monitoring of parks and gardens

6. The LCSD requires its 18 District Leisure Services Offices (District Offices) to conduct routine inspections of parks and gardens. According to the LCSD's survey, to many respondents, some service areas of parks and gardens just attained an "average" rating or below. Audit made site visits to 30 parks and gardens and noted cases of inadequacies which, though not widespread, highlighted room for improvement in the LCSD's routine inspections (paras. 3.3, 3.4, 3.6 and 3.7).

7. Audit visited three District Offices and found that there was room for improvement in their inspection practices (e.g. infrequent inspections, inspection plans not formulated, and inspections not adequately documented) (paras. 3.11 and 3.13).

8. The LCSD's Technical Unit is responsible for conducting annual structural inspections of playground equipment. Audit examined the records for 30 parks/gardens and found that, from 2008 to 2012, annual structural inspections were not conducted for many playground equipment items in these parks/gardens. This is a cause for concern as faulty playground equipment poses a safety risk to users who are mainly young children (paras. 3.18 and 3.19).

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Repair and maintenance of facilities

9. Damaged facilities cause inconvenience and may pose safety risks to users of parks and gardens. Audit noted that long time was taken to repair damaged facilities in some cases (particularly for playground equipment). According to LCSD records, damaged facilities in parks and gardens are a common cause for public complaints (paras. 4.7 and 4.8).

10. District Offices are required to report, through quarterly returns to the LCSD headquarters management, overdue cases of repair and maintenance works for park and garden facilities. During the examination of District Offices' repair and maintenance records, Audit found that many overdue cases (with a delay of more than 30 days each) had not been included in the quarterly returns submitted to the LCSD headquarters management (paras. 4.13 and 4.14).

Way forward

11. *Inadequate management information.* Audit found that the LCSD might not have comprehensive management information (notably regarding open space in non-LCSD venues) for planning its provision of park and garden facilities. Audit also noted that the LCSD did not conduct, on a periodic basis, surveys to obtain relevant user feedback (e.g. user satisfaction level) and assess the public's utilisation of parks and gardens (paras. 6.4 and 6.6).

12. *Provision of open space above the HKPSG minimum standard.* Audit found that numerically the overall provision of open space is generally sufficient to meet the HKPSG standard. According to the projections made by the Planning Department (PlanD) in November 2008, if all the sites reserved as open space were so developed, the existing and planned overall provision of open space would become 3.39 m² per person, some 70% above the HKPSG minimum standard of 2 m² per person (paras. 6.9 and 6.12).

13. *Review on sites reserved for open space development.* In Hong Kong, land is a valuable and scarce resource, subject to strong competing demands. The provision of open space some 70% above the minimum standard (see para. 12 above) raises a question as to whether an optimal allocation of valuable

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land resources has been made for the provision of open space. Audit noted that the PlanD had been exploring various measures to increase housing land supply, which included reviewing the undeveloped open space sites (paras. 6.2, 6.15 and 6.16).

Audit recommendations

14. Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has *recommended* that the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services should:

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- (a) ascertain the underlying reasons for cases with long lead time in commissioning parks and gardens, and take effective measures to expedite project implementation in future (para. 2.25(a));
- (b) devise an action plan for the future development of the Kwai Chung Park site (para. 2.34(a));
- (c) expedite action in designating ex-HAD facilities as public pleasure grounds (para. 2.40(a));

Inspection and monitoring of parks and gardens

- (d) take measures to improve the effectiveness of District Office inspections of parks and gardens (para. 3.8);
- (e) review the practices of the 18 District Offices in the management and conduct of routine inspections (para. 3.16(a));
- (f) ensure that adequate structural inspections are conducted for playground equipment (para. 3.21(d));

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- (g) take measures to ensure that repair and maintenance works of park and garden facilities are completed promptly (para. 4.10(b));

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- (h) lay down a clear definition of long overdue cases which require the follow-up actions of the LCSD headquarters management (para. 4.18(b)); and

Way forward

- (i) review the adequacy of the LCSD's information management practices, with a view to ensuring that adequate management information is collected from various stakeholders (including other providers of open space and users of parks and gardens) for planning the future development of parks and gardens (para. 6.18).

15. Audit has also *recommended* that the Director of Planning should, in collaboration with the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services:

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- (a) consider establishing a mechanism under which the PlanD and the LCSD liaise with each other on a periodic basis so as to update relevant information on the provision of open space in both LCSD and non-LCSD venues (para. 2.15); and

Way forward

- (b) in conducting the review on sites reserved for open space development (see para. 13 above), critically assess the future effective use of lands reserved for open space development, taking into account relevant factors (para. 6.19).

Response from the Administration

16. The Director of Leisure and Cultural Services agrees with the audit recommendations. The Director of Planning has said that the PlanD is willing to review the sites zoned for open space development in consultation with the LCSD.