

WORK OF THE DEVELOPMENT BUREAU IN TREE MANAGEMENT

Executive Summary

1. Trees are integral parts of the outdoor environment and contribute positively to the city’s liveability. The Government strives to uplift the quality of the living environment through active planting, proper maintenance and preservation of trees together with other vegetation. The overall policy responsibility for greening, landscape and tree management rests with the Development Bureau (DEVB). While the Tree Management Office (TMO — established under the Greening, Landscape and Tree Management Section of DEVB) coordinates and oversees the departmental tree management work, the responsibilities for preserving and maintaining trees on government land are assigned among relevant government departments (including conducting tree risk assessment and management (TRAM), and the handling of tree failure incidents and tree-related complaints). Given the large number and wide distribution of trees, the Government adopts an “integrated approach” for the management of trees on government land (i.e. the department responsible for the maintenance of an area or a facility is also responsible for the maintenance of trees there). As at 31 December 2024, there were 40 tree management departments (i.e. 9 core tree management departments and 31 non-core tree management departments) and about 1.7 million trees on government land were under regular care.

2. The Urban Forestry Support Fund (UFSF) was launched in mid-2020 to encourage youngsters to join the arboriculture and horticulture industry, to uplift the professional standards of arboriculture and horticulture practitioners, and to strengthen public education and promotion on proper tree care. UFSF supports DEVB to implement initiatives related to urban forestry, including the Study Sponsorship Scheme (SSS), the Trainee Programme (TP), the International Urban Forestry Conferences, and public education and promotion campaigns. As at 30 April 2025, \$64.8 million (32%) of the \$200 million funding earmarked for UFSF was utilised. Besides, to uplift the quality of tree management personnel and the professional standing of the industry, DEVB launched the Registration Scheme for Tree Management Personnel (RSTMP) in December 2020. As at 30 April 2025, there were 977 practitioners registered under RSTMP. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the work of DEVB in tree management.

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3. ***Scope for improvement in using computer system in tree management.*** According to DEVB, for each TRAM cycle (which generally runs from October to May of the following year), tree management departments should complete the tree risk assessments and submit the completed tree inspection reports (i.e. Form 1 reports for tree group inspections and Form 2 reports for individual tree risk assessments) to TMO via the Tree Management Common Platform (TMCP) or other system interfaces (for transferring data to TMCP). Besides, during the phased implementation of TMCP with progressive adoption by the tree management departments, the departments are also required to submit progress reports to TMO. Audit noted that there was scope for improvement in using TMCP in tree management (paras. 1.7, 2.4 and 2.6), as follows:

- (a) ***Differences in numbers of tree inspection reports.*** While TMCP was fully implemented in July 2025 and DEVB would utilise TMCP to monitor the progress and performance of TRAM and extract data from TMCP from the 2025-26 TRAM cycle onwards, the numbers of completed tree inspection reports reported in the progress reports were consistently larger than those submitted to TMCP for the 2020-21 to 2023-24 TRAM cycles. DEVB needs to ensure the data integrity of input by tree management departments in TMCP (paras. 2.5(a), 2.6(b) and 2.7(a)); and
- (b) ***Need to enhance validation check in TMCP.*** According to DEVB, built-in validation check is available in TMCP to ensure the correctness of data in tree inspection reports. However, Audit examination noted some anomalies in the data maintained in TMCP. For example, TMCP allows the date of inspection being inputted as a date later than the date of submission of tree inspection reports (para. 2.5(b)).

4. ***Increase in percentages of tree inspection reports with irregularities identified.*** The Guidelines for Tree Risk Assessment and Management Arrangement (the TRAM Guidelines) promulgated by DEVB provide technical and performance guidance on tree risk assessment, management, monitoring and maintenance for tree management departments. According to DEVB, the inspection squad established under TMO will audit the tree inspection reports submitted by the tree management departments to identify if there is any irregularity. Audit noted that the percentages of Form 1 reports and Form 2 reports with irregularities identified by TMO's audits

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increased from 16% and 8% in the 2021-22 TRAM cycle to 30% and 38% in the 2023-24 TRAM cycle respectively. DEVB needs to take measures to ensure that tree management departments conduct tree inspections in accordance with the requirements in the TRAM Guidelines (paras. 2.3, 2.10, 2.11 and 2.13).

5. ***Scope for improvement in monitoring submission of reports or summaries for tree failures.*** DEVB guidelines set out the reporting requirements for tree failures by tree management departments. According to DEVB, from January 2022 to April 2025, there were 1,367 tree failure incidents reported to TMO, of which 1,088 (80%) took place on government land. Audit examination noted that there was scope for improvement in monitoring submission of reports or summaries for tree failures (paras. 2.24 to 2.26), as follows:

- (a) ***Need to strengthen monitoring of submission of tree failure reports.*** Audit examined the case files of 100 tree failure incidents reported to TMO in 2024 that took place on government land, and noted that: (i) in 57 (57%) incidents, while it was stated in the case files that the tree management departments concerned had conducted site inspections, tree failure reports were not submitted by the departments and there was no documentation showing the justifications (e.g. minor incidents that took place within the remote areas of country parks); and (ii) of the remaining 43 (43%) incidents, 4 were serious/significant incidents involving fatality and/or injury (i.e. requiring submission of tree failure reports as soon as practicable) and 39 were other serious/significant incidents or other minor incidents (i.e. requiring submission of tree failure reports within 10 working days). The reports of the 4 serious/significant incidents involving fatality and/or injury and 11 (28% of 39) other incidents were submitted to TMO 4 to 86 working days (averaging 27 working days) and 11 to 107 working days (averaging 36 working days) from the dates of incident respectively (para. 2.26(a)); and
- (b) ***Need to strengthen monitoring of submission of massive tree failure summaries.*** According to DEVB guidelines, tree management departments are required to submit massive tree failure summaries to TMO within 72 hours after the lowering of the Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8. Audit noted that there was no management information for monitoring the timely submission of the summaries by tree management departments in accordance with DEVB guidelines (para. 2.26(b)).

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6. *Need to analyse the tree risk assessments conducted for the trees before failure incidents.* According to the TRAM Guidelines, tree management departments should categorise all the sites under their management into three categories of tree risk management zones (i.e. Category I, Category II and Category III zones) according to the risk levels. For the trees within Category I zones (i.e. high tree risk management zones), tree management departments should conduct tree group inspections annually and individual tree risk assessments in accordance with the results of tree group inspections. Audit examination of the case files of the 100 tree failure incidents (see para. 5(a)) noted that: (a) for the 57 tree failure incidents without tree failure reports submitted by tree management departments, there was no management information showing the category of the tree risk management zone of the trees involved in these incidents; and (b) all the remaining 43 tree failure incidents took place within Category I zones. In the respective preceding TRAM cycle before the tree failure incidents, tree group inspections were conducted for the trees involved in all the 43 incidents, while individual tree risk assessments were conducted for the trees involved in 10 (23%) incidents. DEVB needs to analyse the tree failure incidents (including reviewing the tree risk assessments conducted for the trees before failure incidents) and share the lessons learnt with the tree management departments (paras. 2.3 and 2.28 to 2.30).

Urban Forestry Support Fund

7. *Scope for improvement in submitting applications by SSS programme providers.* For Category (1), Category (2) and Scholarship programmes of SSS, SSS programme providers shall submit to DEVB a consolidated list of applicants within 1 month after the commencement of each recognised programme and the funding disbursement applications within 4 months from the completion dates of recognised programmes/semesters. Audit examined the applications submitted by SSS programme providers from July 2020 to April 2025 and noted that: (a) 26 of the 155 consolidated lists of applicants submitted by SSS programme providers were submitted more than 1 month from the commencement of each recognised programme, ranging from 32 to 137 days (averaging 60 days); and (b) for the 800 funding disbursement applications due for submission by SSS programme providers as at 30 April 2025: (i) 70 applications were submitted more than 4 months from the completion dates of recognised programmes/semesters, ranging from 124 to 831 days (averaging 177 days); and (ii) 33 applications had not been submitted, with time lapsed of more than 4 months from the completion dates of recognised programmes/semesters to 30 April 2025, ranging from 127 to 1,321 days (averaging 416 days) (paras. 3.4 and 3.5).

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8. ***Scope for improvement in commissioning the administrator of TP.*** The Construction Industry Council (CIC) was directly commissioned by DEVB to administer TP (para. 3.16). Audit noted the following issues:

- (a) ***Lack of proper documentation for the considerations and decision that engaging CIC did not constitute a procurement of service.*** According to DEVB, the engagement of CIC to administer TP under a partnering arrangement was not a procurement of service, and was not subject to the Stores and Procurement Regulations. However, as far as could be ascertained, there was no documentation on the relevant considerations and decision that engaging CIC did not constitute a procurement of service, at variance with the requirement stipulated in Financial Circular No. 2/2017 on management of funding schemes and non-works projects funded by the Government (paras. 3.15 and 3.16); and
- (b) ***Formal agreement not entered into with CIC.*** CIC commenced preparatory work for administering TP in April 2020 before the launch of TP in August 2020. However, DEVB did not enter into a formal agreement with CIC before the commencement of service. Up to August 2025, a formal agreement was still yet to be entered into (para. 3.17).

DEVB needs to take measures to ensure that the requirements stipulated in Financial Circular No. 2/2017 are complied with in managing future funding schemes and non-works projects funded by the Government, and enter into a formal agreement with CIC for administering TP as soon as possible (paras. 3.16 and 3.18).

9. ***Need to review administration costs paid to CIC for administering TP.*** According to Financial Circular No. 2/2017, the Controlling Officer should formulate a policy on whether there should be a ceiling for administrative overheads included in the project cost and charged to the grant, and ensure that the administrative charges are reasonable and proportionate to the purpose, scale, nature and circumstances of a particular fund or project. However, Audit noted that, up to April 2025, the total administration costs paid to CIC of \$8.7 million accounted for 32% of the total expenditure incurred for TP under UFSF of \$27.5 million. Furthermore, DEVB had not set a ceiling for the administration costs paid to CIC, and there was no documentation showing the justifications for not setting a ceiling. DEVB needs to keep under review the level of administration costs paid to CIC for administering TP and take measures to contain the administration costs (paras. 3.20 to 3.22).

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10. *Need to further evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of SSS and TP.* Audit noted that there was scope for DEVB to further evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of SSS and TP (para. 3.33), as follows:

- (a) *Levels of intakes of beneficiaries under SSS and TP below targets.* Audit noted that, for the 4 years from 2021 to 2024, except for the study sponsorship under SSS in 2024, the actual numbers of intakes of beneficiaries under SSS and TP were below the respective annual targets throughout the period (para. 3.33(a));
- (b) *High withdrawal/drop-out rates under SSS/TP.* As at 30 April 2025:
 - (i) 106 (8%) of the 1,258 initial applications received (from July 2020 to April 2025) under SSS were withdrawn by the applicants before the completion of recognised programmes; and
 - (ii) 103 (36%) of the 283 trainees admitted (from August 2020 to April 2025) under TP dropped out and did not complete TP (para. 3.33(b)); and
- (c) *Scope for improvement in conducting evaluation surveys on beneficiaries under SSS and TP.* According to DEVB, it has invited all beneficiaries under SSS and TP to complete evaluation surveys to collect feedbacks to evaluate the effectiveness of SSS and TP. However, Audit noted that only 37 (4%) of the 893 graduates of SSS recognised programmes and 39 (67%) of the 58 trainees who had completed TP returned the completed surveys (para. 3.33(c)).

Registration scheme and other issues

11. *Need to timely complete processing of applications.* According to DEVB, qualified in-service practitioners are encouraged to register as one or more of the five types of tree management personnel under RSTMP on a voluntary basis. Since the launch of RSTMP in December 2020 and up to April 2025, DEVB had received 1,884 applications for registration and 318 applications for renewal of registration. The application notes issued by DEVB set out the requirements and procedures of applications for registration and renewal under RSTMP. Audit examination noted that there was scope for improvement in processing the applications by DEVB (paras. 4.2 to 4.4), as follows:

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(a) ***Timeframe for notifying applicants of application results not met.*** According to the application notes, applicants will normally be notified of the application results for registration and renewal within 6 weeks (i.e. 42 days) upon receipt of duly completed application forms with all necessary supporting documents, or upon satisfactory verification of documents and/or receipt of supplementary information (i.e. the receipt of required information). As at 30 April 2025: (i) of the 1,827 processed applications for registration, the applicants of 138 applications were notified 43 days to 12 months (averaging 3 months) after the dates of receipt of required information; and (ii) of the 280 processed applications for renewal of registration, the applicants of 7 applications were notified 49 days to 9 months (averaging 4 months) after the dates of receipt of required information (para. 4.5); and

(b) ***Long time taken in obtaining required information.*** The 6-week notification timeframe stipulated in the application notes is only applicable since the dates of receipt of required information. As at 30 April 2025: (i) of the 1,827 processed applications for registration, the applicants of 348 applications had provided supplementary information as required 43 days to 10 months (averaging 3 months) from the dates of application; and (ii) of the 280 processed applications for renewal of registration, the applicants of 50 applications had provided supplementary information as required 43 days to 11 months (averaging 4 months) from the dates of application (para. 4.6).

12. ***Late applications related to renewal of registration.*** Each registration of personnel type under RSTMP is valid for three years. According to the application notes, application for renewal of registration or extension of validity period of the current registration for 6 months should be made at least 10 weeks before the expiry date of the current registration. From December 2020 to April 2025, DEVB had received 318 applications for renewal of registrations, involving 755 registrations of personnel type. Audit noted that some applications were submitted after the deadline, as follows: (a) the tree management personnel of 490 registrations had applied for extension of validity period and all were approved. Of these registrations, the applications of 97 (20%) registrations were submitted 2 to 91 days (averaging 38 days) after the deadline; and (b) of the 610 registrations with applications for renewal approved, the applications of 206 (34%) registrations were submitted 1 to 101 days (averaging 40 days) after the deadline (paras. 4.9 and 4.10).

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13. **Way forward of RSTMP.** Audit noted that: (a) according to a survey conducted by DEVB prior to the launch of RSTMP, half of the respondents supported a voluntary scheme as a start and a mandatory scheme in the long term. Since the launch of RSTMP in December 2020 and up to April 2025, DEVB had not conducted any similar surveys regarding the implementation of a mandatory registration scheme; (b) in March 2023, DEVB had completed a study for developing the requirements of local professional assessments and trade tests under RSTMP. As at 30 April 2025, the local professional assessments and trade tests had not yet been incorporated into RSTMP; and (c) to promote proper management of trees on private land, DEVB published the Handbook on Tree Management in April 2016. While RSTMP was launched in December 2020, it had not yet been incorporated into the Handbook as at 30 April 2025. DEVB needs to review the implementation of RSTMP with a view to formulating further enhancement measures for RSTMP, taking into account all relevant factors and the audit observations and recommendations in this Audit Report (paras. 4.16 and 4.17).

14. **Scope for improvement in adoption of new technology in tree management work.** Audit noted that, in August 2021, DEVB launched a three-year study programme to collect and analyse the tree movement data captured by tilt sensors installed on 8,000 trees. In January 2023, DEVB recommended more extensive use of technology in tree management, including considering extending the use of tilt sensors having regard to the findings of the study ending in 2024. In August 2024, the study on tilt sensors was completed and it was recommended to expand the sensor network. As at 30 April 2025, the tilt sensors installed on the 8,000 trees deployed in the study were not in use and no tilt sensors were installed on more trees. According to DEVB, it had been considering further studying the integration of the tilt sensors and other advanced technologies in tree management work. DEVB needs to expedite the consideration of further studying the integration of the tilt sensors and other advanced technologies in tree management work (paras. 4.20 to 4.22).

Audit recommendations

15. **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 Secretary for Development should:**

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- (a) ensure the data integrity of input and enhance validation check in TMCP (para. 2.21(a));
- (b) ensure that tree management departments conduct tree inspections in accordance with the requirements in the TRAM Guidelines (para. 2.21(c));
- (c) ensure that tree failure reports and massive tree failure summaries are timely submitted by tree management departments and justifications of not requiring submission are properly documented (para. 2.34(a));
- (d) analyse the tree failure incidents (including reviewing the tree risk assessments conducted for the trees before failure incidents) and share the lessons learnt with the tree management departments (para. 2.34(b));

UFSF

- (e) ensure that SSS programme providers timely submit consolidated lists of applicants and funding disbursement applications in accordance with the stipulated timeframes and take follow-up actions on outstanding cases as appropriate (para. 3.11(b));
- (f) in managing future funding schemes and non-works projects funded by the Government, ensure that the requirements stipulated in Financial Circular No. 2/2017 are complied with, including maintaining proper documentation of:
 - (i) all relevant considerations and decisions for the engagement of a non-government partner to administer the project (para. 3.30(a)(i)); and
 - (ii) the justifications for not setting a ceiling for the administration costs paid to a non-government partner for administering the project (para. 3.30(a)(ii));

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- (g) enter into a formal agreement with CIC for administering TP as soon as possible (para. 3.30(b));
- (h) keep under review the level of administration costs paid to CIC for administering TP and take measures to contain the administration costs (para. 3.30(d));
- (i) further evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of SSS and TP (para. 3.38(a));

Registration scheme and other issues

- (j) ensure that the applicants for registration and renewal under RSTMP are notified of the application results in accordance with the stipulated timeframes, and the applicants timely submit the required information (para. 4.18(a) and (b));
- (k) keep monitoring the timeliness of submission of applications related to renewal of registration under RSTMP by the registered tree management personnel (para. 4.18(c));
- (l) review the implementation of RSTMP with a view to formulating further enhancement measures for RSTMP (para. 4.18(e)); and
- (m) expedite the consideration of further studying the integration of the tilt sensors and other advanced technologies in tree management work (para. 4.25(a)).

Response from the Government

16. The Secretary for Development agrees with the audit recommendations.