

The 10th Fire Services Department Public Liaison Group
Notes of the Second Meeting

The second meeting of the 10th Fire Services Department Public Liaison Group (PLG) was held at the multi-purpose hall on G/F, Fire Services Headquarters Building on 25th August 2003 at 6:30 p.m.

Opening Remarks

The Department welcomed all members to the second meeting of the 10th PLG.

Confirmation of the Notes of the last meeting

2. The notes of the last meeting were confirmed without amendments.

Activities of the Public Liaison Group

3. Members were informed that the passing-out parade on 20th June and “Fire Safety Ambassador Trainer” course on 28th and 29th June had been arranged for members’ attendance and participation. Also, members were invited in writing to attend the passing-out parade on 19th September and “Wildlife Protection and Hillfire Prevention Publicity Campaign Launching Ceremony” on 20th September. In due course, members in the New Territories would be invited to the opening ceremony of Lau Fau Shan Fire Station cum Ambulance Depot. Other interested members could contact the Secretary as well. (Post-meeting note: The Department would send invitation letters to all members for the opening ceremony of Lau Fau Shan Fire Station cum Ambulance Depot.)

Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

Civic Education

4. Members were informed that as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic had subsided, the Department resumed launching Smart Teen Challenge Camp in July and preventive hygiene measures were strengthened to ensure that all participants would feel at ease during training. According to South China Morning Post’s recent coverage on students’ participation in the camp,

feedback from interviewed students was positive and they hoped that the duration of the camp could be extended. Teachers also expressed their wishes that similar camping activities could be arranged for them. In this connection, the Department would consider this suggestion with the Education and Manpower Bureau.

New Fire Appliances and Ambulances

5. The Department said that the open tender exercise involving forty new ambulances had been completed. Nine Light Ambulances suitable for traveling on narrow roads would be procured later.

World Firefighter Games (WFG)

6. The Department indicated that direct signing of contract with the World Governing Body of WFG for hosting the Games was regarded as inappropriate according to legal advice, therefore it would organize WFG and Fire Asia International in 2006 in co-operation with Institution of Fire Engineers (Hong Kong Branch). The Institution of Fire Engineers (Hong Kong Branch) had already set up a limited company which would sign contract with the World Governing Body in due course. The Department further said that since the Games would last for one week with over 5 000 participants, this big event would employ a tremendous amount of manpower and resources. Some business establishments had already come into contact with the Department for matters concerning the provision of sponsorship.

7. A PLG member suggested that a public relations company should be appointed to make detailed arrangements for the event. The Department thanked her for the suggestion and pointed out that the World Governing Body would be responsible for making detailed arrangements. The Department had not considered such appointment for the time being, but the views would be conveyed to the newly established limited company. A PLG member proposed that the Department could liaise with Invest Hong Kong for assistance. In response to the suggestion, the Department revealed that support from relevant policy bureaux and departments had been obtained before bidding for the Games. Also, free admission to the Games had always been arranged over the years.

New Training Facilities

8. Members were informed that installation of facilities inside the Breathing

Apparatus and Tactical Training Block was still in progress. The Department briefed the meeting about the operation of electronic sensors, and pointed out that the supplier was adjusting the accuracy and sensitivity of the sensors because the testing results were not satisfactory.

Auxiliary Fire Services

9. Members agreed to delete this item from the agenda of the next meeting.

Matters for Discussion

Fire Hazard Abatement Notice (FHAN)

10. The Department informed the meeting that a PLG member raised a question in her fax: “The Customs and Excise Department had severely combated illicit underground refuelling stations from June onwards. A customs officer stated then that FHANs issued by FSD failed to create complete deterrent effect. In this respect, has the Department conducted any reviews to coordinate with the operation?” The Department thanked her for the question, and stated that for the purpose of improving such deficiency, amendment to relevant legislations had commenced last year and the Fire Services (Fire Hazard Abatement) Regulation had been passed by the Legislative Council (Legco) on 3rd July this year with stiffer penalties for illicit fuelling. The regulation would take effect on 1st January next year. The Chairman further explained to the meeting the main point of the regulation in respect of combat against illicit fuelling. A person committed an offence and should be liable to direct prosecution if he had possession of dangerous goods in category 5 in any premises for the purpose of a business of transferring such dangerous goods into the fuel tank of a motor vehicle without a valid dangerous goods licence. Any charges of illicit refuelling should be registered in the Land Registry, and any conviction records should be published on local newspaper. The court could issue a closure order for 6-months’ complete closure of any premises repeatedly used for illicit refuelling. Closure orders should also be registered in Land Registry. A person on first conviction would be liable to a fine at level 6 (i.e. HK\$ 100,000) and to imprisonment for 6 months, and a person on second conviction would be liable to a fine of HK\$200,000 and to imprisonment for 1 year.

11. In response to a PLG member’s enquiry, the Chairman indicated that marine dangerous goods were under the jurisdiction of Marine Department. He quoted the

recent dangerous goods case in Po Toi O to explain that relevant government departments, including FSD, Customs and Excise Department and Marine Department would continue to combat illicit refuelling in concerted efforts. Moreover, publicity for the new regulation would commence around October and November by means of television and radio, etc. Also, district boards would brief different sectors about the new regulation.

Third Generation Mobilizing System and Fire Tunics

12. The Department indicated that a PLG member asked in her fax: “With regard to the No.3 alarm fire at Far East Bank (Mongkok) Building, the fire personnel pointed out that there were design problems with the communication system and the fire tunics. The spokesperson for the Department admitted there were problems with the communication system and stated that the third generation communication system to be commissioned by the end of this year would improve the situation. As for the fire tunics, the spokesperson emphasized that it was up to international standards but the Department would continue to explore further improvement. I believe that the testing of the third generation communication system is now underway. Can the testing results relieve anxieties of staff users? Regarding the fire tunics, are there any further outcomes from the exploration?”

13. The Department said that great importance had been attached to the matter. After the incident, officers were deployed to conduct site investigation and it was revealed that the site was not a blind spot. He explained to the meeting about the operation mode of trunked radio system and pointed out that “blind spot” could not be totally avoided because radio signals had to be conveyed through transmitters and repeaters. However, the Mobilizing and Communication Group would monitor and improve the operation of radio transmission network from time to time, with a view to minimizing the number of “blind spot”. Apart from deploying Mobile Command Unit to different districts to detect blind spots, the Mobilizing and Communication Group welcomed fire personnel to report any blind spots they found to the Department, so as to improve the operation of the mobilizing systems on fire appliances/ ambulances and the transmission of the hilltop repeaters.

14. In response to a PLG member’s enquiry on whether the Department would consider providing mobile telephones to operational staff, the Department replied that mobile telephones were being provided on ambulances. If the trial results were found satisfactory, the Department would consider extending the project to other units.

However, he stressed that the handheld radios now used by fire personnel were considerably effective. Another PLG member expressed that civil communication system could break down easily during major incidents and therefore the Government could not rely on such system completely. The Department concluded that the Government should have a safe and reliable communication system to ensure effective operation during emergency.

15. The Department informed the meeting that the existing fire tunics (Bristol) were made of heat-resistant and air-permeable materials, which could ensure the safety of Fire Services members, and all fire tunics conformed to international standards as well as the requirements of the Fire Services Department. The Department paid great attention to the equipment members were provided with in performing their duties, and will check up the existing equipment from time to time. In normal circumstances, after receiving comments from members on the improvement of existing equipment, or before replenishing the stock, the Department would consider whether the change of equipment would be necessary, or whether better alternatives were available in the market. The Department had already acquired new lightweight fire tunics (Proban), which mainly catered for outdoor work, such as combating hill fires. For easy identification of members working outdoor, these tunics were essentially orange in colour. The tunics would officially come into use on 15 September 2003.

Accident in which a bus on Tuen Mun Road plunged down the slope

16. The Department indicated that a PLG member stated in her fax: "First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for the outstanding fire personnel who bravely saved lives in the accident involving a bus plunging down the slope at Sham Tseng on 10 July. Their spirit of serving people and their attitude towards work exemplify the high standard of management and training rendered by the Hong Kong Fire Services Department. On that day, apart from physical consumption, I believe that seeing such a large number of casualties at the scene has a certain extent of psychological impact on them. I therefore wonder if those responsible for handling this serious accident were granted extra days of leave or if psychological assistance will be arranged for them afterwards." The Department thanked her for her commendation, and indicated that Chief Secretary of Administration and Secretary for the Civil Service also wrote to express their appreciation for the performance of Fire Services members taking part in the rescue operation; however, those taking part in this operation were not granted extra days of leave. A normal way for members to

alleviate pressure was to share their feelings about work with one another. Since the 1990s, the Department had collaborated with other institutions, such as the Chinese University, in providing psychological counseling courses for members. If officers in charge noticed that their subordinates had emotional problems after handling major incidents, or members themselves considered that they needed psychological services, the Department would fix meetings with the psychological counseling officer for concerned members. For individual members who were in serious condition, the Department would refer the case to a professional person for follow-up action as appropriate.

Training on negotiation skills

17. The Department indicated that a PLG member stated in the fax: "In recent years, cases of people jumping off the building have been increasing. Fire personnel are usually the first to arrive at the scene, and therefore have a greater chance of coming into contact with the concerned party in the first instance. Very often, they take on the role of a negotiator, trying to talk the concerned party round. Does the Department encourage that? Do they receive normal training on that?" The Department replied that members would normally try to calm down the suicidal persons by comforting them. However, members might request the police to send negotiators for assistance, depending on how the situation went. At present, the Department had about 30 officers who had received training on negotiation skills in the Police. These officers would also offer help after receiving relevant calls. The Department had also distributed self-learning VCDs on basic negotiation skills to members. In response to the question of another PLG member, the Department indicated that at the scene of incident, the fire personnel and the police would play the role of the rescue commander and the incident commander respectively. The Department also explained that in handling cases involving people threatening to jump off the building, the main duty of the fire personnel was to rescue the concerned party, whereas the police were responsible for negotiation. For the sake of occupational safety, at present the fire personnel would only use the rescue cushion instead of the jumping sheet, and the Department would also keep watch for better alternatives in the market.

The 11th Fire Services Department Public Liaison Group

18. The Department informed the meeting that application for the 11th Fire Services Department Public Liaison Group would be accepted early next year, and

explained how the Group would be established. The process mainly involved the invitation of serving members who had joined the Public Liaison Group for first time to remain in office, comprising not more than five residents from each district. These members should have good attendance record, and the service of each member could not be extended for more than two consecutive years. As for the remaining seats, membership would be decided by a random draw. Of the 100 applicants for membership of the current PLG, 76 had never acquired membership before. This indicated that the mechanism was conducive to the incorporation of more new faces and new voices.

First Responder Programme

19. The Department briefed the meeting on the First Responder Programme, which would be implemented in September this year on a trial basis for three months. The Department had made arrangements for some fire personnel to attend advanced ambulance aid course. The course comprised 1-week classroom instruction and 3-week practical attachment. Upon completion of the course, the fire personnel would become First Responders, who would respond to four types of emergency ambulance calls, including cardiac arrest, serious bleeding, airway obstruction and breathing failure. The Department also emphasized that First Responders were not meant to replace ambulance personnel. On receipt of the above four types of calls, the Department would simultaneously despatch ambulances and fire appliances to the scene. If the First Responders arrived at the scene first, they would provide proper treatment for the patient first, and hand over the patient to the ambulance personnel afterwards. This programme not only helped fire personnel achieve self-enhancement, but also facilitated a more speedy rescue service for the public, especially at areas where ambulance personnel would have difficulties in getting access to, such as the fire ground. Every First Responder would be provided with a vest printed with identification words and marks. Moreover, the Department had spent approximately \$1.7 million on the acquisition of new basic first-aid equipment; the fund was available after cutting expenditure on other areas of the Department's operation. The Department would hold a press briefing session in early September to promote this programme to the public, and would review the programme after three months' trial.

20. A PLG member suggested that the Ambulance Command should be separated from the Department and become an independent government department. In response to this suggestion, the Department indicated that policy-related issues

were beyond the PLG's terms of reference and therefore it was not appropriate to discuss the issue in the meeting. The Department also emphasized that she was now responsible for all matters related to fire fighting and rescue. Despite the current need to cut expenses, the Department would continue to allocate resources according to practical needs to achieve the objective of resource optimization, such as the acquisition of new ambulances and various kinds of protective clothing for frontline ambulance personnel to protect them against infection during the SARS period. The Director of Fire Services would also explain to members of Special Finance Committee of the Legco how the Department utilized resources.

21. In response to the enquiry of a PLG member, the Department indicated that in the manpower plan submitted to the Security Bureau, the Department had explained the need for recruiting frontline staff. The Department would seek approval for open recruitment in due course from the vetting panel, which was composed of Chief Secretary for Administration, Financial Secretary and Secretary for the Civil Service. As for the suggestion of merging the Management Group and the Community Relations Division, the Department indicated that the work of the latter would be handed over to units at district level. The Department would adopt a flexible approach to staff deployment, and take account of Government policies on downsizing the civil service and cutting departmental expenditure in formulating operational strategies appropriate for the Department.

22. In response to the comments of a PLG member, the Department said that the Government would continue to allocate resources for the Department to establish new fire stations. To cater for the development of West Kowloon, the Government would further dispose of land for the Department to construct the new Tsimshatsui Fire Station, and the existing fire station on Canton Road would be demolished. Another PLG member urged other members to try their best to propose topics to be discussed in writing before the meeting, and avoid slangy language and immature attitude during discussion. The Department thanked her for her comments.

23. There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:10 p.m.