

Playright's Comments on the Consultation Document on Review on the Role, Functions and Composition of District Councils

As a not-for-profit organisation promoting the child's right to play, Playright Children's Play Association ("Playright") has a clear vision – to enrich the quality life of every child through quality play. The proposals made in Chapter 2 of the Consultation Document are particularly relevant to the implementation of such a vision; my comments below have been distilled from the views of a large group of Playright staff and volunteers and are keyed directly to clauses in that chapter.

Setting up District Facilities Management Committees (cls. 2.6-2.7)

Playright is very pleased to learn that the Government is proposing to establish committees in District Councils to steer the management of identified facilities under the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). We strongly agree that this measure will further strengthen the role of District Councils' in district administration and can better ensure that district needs are promptly met.

In this respect, we respectfully suggest that the Government should ensure that there is an effective mechanism within each committee for pro-actively seeking out and determining the recreational needs and interests of all stakeholders in its district, including children and their families, where these needs and interests affect the operation and utilisation of district leisure facilities and as they are part of the broader community picture. Key decisions or endorsements made in the committee should take such recreational needs and interest into account, and stakeholders should be adequately informed that this is being done.

Five key facilities at district level for which District Councils could assume management responsibility (cl. 2.8)

Playright has been working closely with the Hong Kong Central Library and public parks of LCSD for the previous five years. We have also collaborated keenly with the Lands Department to provide district play events for community in selected open spaces. We have found, however, that district needs for play and recreation cannot be promptly and usefully met if the District Council focuses its attention purely on recreational facilities and open spaces managed by the LCSD, or indeed by other Government departments or statutory bodies, such as the Lands Department or the Housing Authority.

We strongly suggest that the new committees should liaise and fully communicate with such departments and relevant NGOs, including Playright, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of how overall district needs for recreation and play provision can both be *centred on* and *transcend* the five key facilities so far identified through the Consultation Document.

Management of activities within selected facilities (cls. 2.12-2.14)

The Government should further ensure that such committees have sufficient authority and resources to prompt relevant Government departments to carry out proper feasibility and evaluation studies on any new projects or services proposed for these and other district facilities.

Children's outdoor play programmes in public parks, toy library provision in public libraries, provision for indoor playrooms and mobile toy libraries immediately spring to mind as ways of creatively addressing district needs for child play and recreation. To reiterate one of our main concerns: some initiatives may well be tied to "traditional" facilities, while others will be effective where they break free from purely physical constraints

However, given the widely expressed concern that children's lifestyles are steadily becoming more sedentary, we would like to strongly support an emphasis on district council management of public parks and on how youth and adult leaders can be trained and deployed to help children get the most out of outdoor play in these green lungs. As with many other recreational facilities, human software is required to maximize the benefit of public park facilities, and any new management plan affecting parks should take this into account.

Increase in funding provision for the management of district facilities (cls. 2.12-2.14)

Playright fully supports increasing the funding provision for the management of district facilities and proposes that District Councils use such funding to boost the amount and quality of leisure activities and recreational programmes for children. This funding will further encourage and strengthen the partnership between local NGOs and District Councils, allowing them to make joint efforts to meet district needs on a wider scale. Some possible examples are an annual district play festival for families and supervised play programmes for families in parks.

Implementing the above suggestions on a pilot basis (2.17)

Playright considers that districts with relatively inadequate facilities should be selected for first stage / pilot implementation. Tseung Kwan O, Yuen Long and Tung Chung districts immediately come to mind as prime candidates.

Conclusion

In theory, the involvement of District Councils in the management of local facilities should enhance community participation and better address the needs of local residents. However, since children are not eligible to vote in District Council elections, Playright is doubtful as to how faithfully and purposefully elected councillors might represent the children of their district.

Our children are very important stakeholders in this new exercise. We hope that councillors will seize any opportunities offered by the proposed reform to listen to and seek out the needs and demands of children and their families on the local recreational and leisure facilities. New and attractive ways of drawing on children's views are to our thinking an essential part of the enhanced democratic process that we believe underlies the current proposal.

(end)