

COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Enhancing the public engagement process

Purpose

This paper seeks Members' agreement to refine and enhance the public engagement (PE) process.

The conventional PE model

2. As sustainability issues cut across a wide spectrum of policy areas and affect the interest of different sectors of the community, the Council for Sustainable Development (SDC) has been adopting a bottom-up and stakeholder-led PE model to engage the community and harness public opinions on key sustainability issues, with a view to building an overall sustainable development strategy for Hong Kong. SDC's PE process typically comprises the following four stages –

- (a) Identifying a priority area as PE topic;
- (b) Preparing a document (i.e. the PE document) to introduce the topic and invite views;
- (c) Engaging stakeholders and the wider community in discussions; and
- (d) Reporting on the views collected and putting forward recommendations to the Government.

3. The Strategy Sub-Committee (SSC) helps SDC with the formulation of a sustainable development strategy for Hong Kong, and is therefore responsible for conducting PEs. Hitherto, it has been assisted by a Support Group (SG) in the planning and implementation of each PE exercise. Both SSC and SG would take part in focus group meetings to understand the PE topic in depth; help prepare the PE document; join PE

activities (such as regional fora and meetings with stakeholder groups); and help draft the PE report with recommendations for SDC's consideration. Throughout the process, they are assisted by a Programme Director (PD) who is an external consultant appointed by SDC. In addition, an Independent Analysis and Reporting Agency (IRA) is commissioned to compile and analyse the views collected.

Possible enhancement

4. The same PE process has been adopted for the past 8 PE exercises. As SDC is about to embark on its 9th PE exercise, it would be timely to review the process to see if there is room for improvement. Having regard to the experience gained and the evolution of communication channels over the years, the following changes to improve the PE process are proposed for SDC's agreement.

(a) Streamline the organisation structure

Observation:

There are overlaps in the work and roles between SG and SSC, which prolong the PE process and affect efficiency. In the PE on Long-term Decarbonisation Strategy, for example, there was duplication of membership, with over half of the SSC members serving on both SSC and SG.

Recommendation:

Streamline the organisation structure, such that for each PE exercise, instead of appointing an SG, the Government may appoint several experts with relevant knowledge of that PE topic as co-opt members of SSC to provide the necessary input and support.

(b) Sharpen the focus of the PE process

Observation:

SDC/SSC usually reach out to similar groups of organisations and the general public in all the PE exercises. However, given the different nature and locus of each PE

topic, such a general engagement strategy may not be targeted enough to obtain insightful feedback from the relevant sectors or stakeholders.

Recommendation:

A specific and fit-for-purpose engagement strategy and process should be adopted for each PE. For instance, the general public should be more involved in PEs related to livelihood issues, while views from relevant experts and stakeholders (e.g. trades, professional groups and academics) should be collected for more complex or sector-specific topics. A different mix of engagement activities can also be adopted each time to suit the topic. For instance, more school visits can be done for topics which have a stronger educational element or would appeal more to the younger generation.

(c) ***Random sampling as an additional tool for views collection***

Observation:

In the past PEs, views were mainly collected through Views Collection Forms (VCFs) and other written submissions, or at discussion fora. They often come from people who are more articulate, have a stronger view on the topic, or have better knowledge on the topic, but do not necessarily represent the silent majority. With the wider use of electronic communication and social media channels, a relatively small group of people can easily mobilise a large number of petitions in favour of a certain view to override the others. This will compromise the objective of the PE process which is to listen broadly to, and balance, public opinions in order to formulate recommendations more acceptable to the community.

Recommendation:

Depending on the topic of the PE, random sampling methods (e.g. randomised telephone survey) which reflect the population's general view may also be adopted as an additional views collection tool for PE exercises, so that the

feedback can be more representative and balanced.

(d) Make better use of the support given by PD

Observation:

The current practice of appointing an IRA in addition to a PD just for collecting and processing the views expressed during the PE would seem overly complicated nowadays, when technology already allows views to be collated digitally in a much more efficient manner.

Recommendation:

With new processing functions incorporated into the PE website, quantitative data on the views collected can be fed to PD direct, to complement the qualitative views it collects first-hand at focus group meetings and face-to-face discussions. In lieu of an IRA, SDC/SSC can give early steer to PD on how statistical results should be presented to allow a more useful analysis of the results.

Advice Sought

5. Members are invited to consider and agree to the recommendations to enhance the PE process, as set out in paragraph 4 above.

Council Secretariat
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