

COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Opening up of the Meetings of the Council for Sustainable Development

Purpose

This paper seeks Members' views on the suggestion to open the meetings of the Council for Sustainable Development (the Council) to further enhance the transparency of its operation.

Recommendation

2. It is recommended that –
 - (a) Council meetings be opened to the public and the media on selected occasions; and
 - (b) the Council Chairman (either by himself or jointly with the Chairs of the Strategy Sub-Committee (SSC) and the Education and Publicity Sub-Committee (EPSC)) holds a press briefing after each Council meeting.

Current transparency measures adopted by the Council

3. Currently, members of the public have access to matters related to the Council through the Internet – the Council's membership, terms of reference, contact information of the Secretariat, agendas, papers¹ and non-attributable digests of the notes of meetings are uploaded onto the sustainable development (SD) website (<http://www.susdev.gov.hk>). The public may also contact the Council Secretariat for enquiries, information and suggestions. A bilingual press release, on subjects discussed at the meeting and the main points raised, is issued after each Council meeting.

¹ Council papers other than classified papers, such as the invitation for response documents and questionnaires for individual public engagement exercises in their draft forms, are uploaded to the internet.

Considerations

4. At the Council meeting held on 16 April 2009, some Members suggested that, to further enhance the transparency of its operation, the Council should consider open up its meetings. The pros and cons of opening up the Council meetings are set out below for Members' consideration –

Arguments for opening up

- (a) a key element of SD is stakeholder participation. The higher the level of the public's awareness and understanding of SD is the better. Opening up the Council meetings would enhance stakeholder participation;
- (b) opening up Council meetings could further enhance the transparency of the operation of the Council and counteract possible perception that discussion at the Council is swayed by the interest of any particular sector that may be represented on the Council, particularly when the subject of discussion is controversial such as the current engagement process on the built environment;

Arguments against opening up

- (c) when Members were appointed to the Council, they were not given any indication that the Council will conduct its business through open meetings. While Members are appointed ad personam, their comments at open meetings could be mistaken by the media or public as representing the interest of trade or profession to which they belong;
- (d) the Council's role is advisory in nature. To ensure the effective operation of the Council, it is of utmost importance to create an environment which is conducive to frank exchanges and candid comments. Opening up Council meetings may not necessarily be helpful in this respect. Some Members may be less motivated to speak up, especially when they are in the minority in front of cameras; and
- (e) discussions and exchanges of ideas amongst Council members, particularly those in the preliminary stage of an engagement topic, at open meetings could create undue expectations or speculations.

Criteria of opening up

5. With a view to enhancing the transparency of the Council while minimizing any negative effects of opening up, Council meetings may be opened on a selective basis. Reference may be made to the arrangement of the Advisory Council on the Environment² (ACE). The ACE opens only the presentation and question-and-answer sessions of a discussion item on environmental impact assessment (EIA) report requiring the attendance of the project proponent. Internal discussions amongst ACE members on EIA items are not open to the public. Discussions on other non-EIA items are also conducted at closed-door meetings. The Council may wish to open a meeting or part of a meeting if the Council is satisfied that –

- (a) opening up would not hinder unfettered discussion of any agenda item, e.g. a briefing or presentation on SD topics to the Council, the information in which would also be made available to a larger public audience; and
- (b) the discussion item is not time-sensitive, i.e. pre-mature disclosure of which to the public may result in prejudice to any party or the Government, e.g. the drafting of invitation for response document for any particular public engagement exercise.

Post-meeting media briefings

6. As a further measure to promote transparency, a press briefing by the Chairman after each meeting (open or close) would help enhance public undertaking of the work of the Council. These press briefings may be conducted by the Chairman or jointly with Chairs of SSC and EPSC.

Logistics for open meetings

7. Logistics for open meetings will be as follows –

- (a) Council meetings venue will be held at the Conference Room on 33/F of Revenue Tower, Wanchai;

² The terms of reference of ACE is to keep under review the state of the environment in Hong Kong and advise the Government through the Secretary of the Environment, on appropriate measures which might be taken to combat pollution of all kinds, and to protect and sustain the environment.

- (b) Agenda of the open meeting/items are posted on the Council's website five working days before the meeting date;
- (c) member of the public and media can observe the proceedings of the open sessions on television monitors (two 40" LCD TV) in the Public Viewing Room (PVR);
- (d) prior registration is recommended. People who walk in will also be allowed to observe the meeting proceedings in the PVR subject to seat availability and registration on the spot;
- (e) broadcasting of the meeting proceedings will be suspended during closed-door discussions; and
- (f) security guards from the Building Managements Office of Revenue Tower will be in attendance at the PVR.

Council Secretariat
July 2009