

Executive Summary

Direct Investigation Operation Report

Government's Work on Management of Countryside Facilities

Introduction

Hong Kong's country parks, hiking trails and related countryside facilities are important resources for the public to go hiking, enjoy outdoor recreation and get close to nature. In recent years, with the growing public demand for outdoor activities, the usage of countryside facilities has increased significantly. Some hiking trails and facilities in remote areas or in harsher natural environments are subject to prolonged impacts from weather, natural wear and tear, visitor flow and frequent use.

2. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") is the principal department responsible for managing all country parks and special areas across Hong Kong. Its duties cover the management of facilities widely distributed across locations, from remote hiking trails to popular attractions that are frequently crowded with visitors. The Home Affairs Department ("HAD") also undertakes the construction, maintenance and management of certain countryside facilities, while the Civil Engineering and Development Department ("CEDD") is responsible for constructing some countryside facilities before handing them over to the relevant departments for subsequent maintenance and management upon completion.

3. However, we note that media reports and public views indicate considerable room for improvement in the management and maintenance of countryside facilities by relevant departments. Areas warranting improvement include persistent inadequacy of toilets and poor hygiene conditions, delays in repairing certain facilities, unclear signage, scattered and rarely updated information on transportation and the locations of water filling stations in country parks, and a lack of coordination among departments in facility planning, daily management and contingency measures, which may affect the experience and even the safety of hikers and visitors.

4. Proper management and maintenance of countryside facilities are essential for safeguarding public safety, maintaining the normal use of facilities, and enhancing the environmental quality of the countryside. As the principal department responsible for

managing country parks and special areas, AFCD is tasked with safeguarding hikers' safety, educating the public, and conserving the natural environment. The Government needs to enhance the maintenance and management of countryside facilities, and strengthen the monitoring of outsourced contractors and the mechanisms for information dissemination and inter-departmental coordination, so as to ensure the safety of the facilities, enhance the convenience of public use, and reduce the impact on the natural environment.

Our Findings

5. Our investigation found that HAD and CEDD have carried out and overseen works related to countryside facilities within their respective responsibilities, in accordance with established manuals and contractual arrangements. While AFCD has a mechanism in place for facility inspection and maintenance, it lacks an internal system to standardise monitoring and record-keeping, as well as specified time frames and standard procedures for facility maintenance, making it difficult to effectively measure work efficiency or identify delays. In light of these findings, we have the following comments and recommendations.

(I) Optimising Inspection, Maintenance and Management Mechanisms for Facilities

Reviewing Maintenance Time Frames and Setting Tiered Indicators

6. Between 2019 and mid-2025, AFCD's management centres and Engineering Division, together with their appointed contractors, handled an average of about 1,200 maintenance cases for country park facilities each year, with approximately 90 per cent completed within 30 days. However, AFCD records show that a country park rain shelter first reported with roof damage in 2019 was not reconstructed until 2025, a process that lasted five years and nine months, far beyond a reasonable time frame for repairs. AFCD explained that the works were scheduled by the Engineering Division, and the construction period was prolonged because the shelter's structure was relatively complex, the design and survey work required an extended period, and progress was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022.

7. We acknowledge that the factors mentioned may have had some impact on the progress of the maintenance works. However, the case highlights deficiencies in preliminary planning and construction risk assessment, resulting in repeated delays. We note that AFCD has not yet specified time frames or service pledges for different categories of maintenance works, nor has it introduced time frames or monitoring mechanisms for each stage of the maintenance process. At present, the system depends largely on the judgement of individual management centres and the prioritisation of more urgent tasks, without uniform standards for tracking progress or evaluating performance. With the increasing number of projects and the growing frequency of inter-departmental collaboration, the current arrangements may be inadequate to ensure efficient maintenance and effective monitoring.

8. We consider it essential for AFCD to comprehensively review its existing maintenance mechanism, taking into account factors such as facility type and location, required materials, and the nature, scale and urgency of maintenance works. Drawing on HAD's preventive maintenance inspection system, AFCD may explore incorporating its annual inspection results into a tiered maintenance framework. Clear time frames or performance indicators should be set for maintenance works, supported by a regular monitoring and reporting system to enable early detection of delayed cases, analysis of underlying causes and timely remedial actions.

9. AFCD may consider developing a standardised internal procedures manual that clearly outlines the steps in the maintenance process, while also exploring the establishment of timelines for each key stage, to ensure compliance among frontline and management staff across all districts, thereby improving the efficiency of maintenance works.

Reviewing the Works Prioritisation Mechanism

10. We note that the Maintenance Work Application Form submitted by AFCD's Management Division to the Engineering Division for large-scale maintenance works contains a "Priority" field to indicate urgency. However, AFCD's internal mechanism for prioritising maintenance works lacks clear and consistent assessment criteria, rendering the "Priority" field of limited practical value. Records show that maintenance works for a rain shelter were put on hold and repeatedly delayed, and the damage to the shelter progressively worsened, eventually necessitating full reconstruction.

11. In our opinion, AFCD should review its existing criteria for prioritising works and consider introducing objective, quantifiable assessment methods, such as establishing scoring indicators based on relevant factors to evaluate the urgency of maintenance works. In addition, AFCD should put in place a monitoring mechanism to regularly review and update the prioritisation of maintenance works, ensuring timely repair of damaged countryside facilities.

Formulating Contingency Guidelines to Enhance Safety Management

12. When facilities pose potential safety risks that cannot be addressed promptly, AFCD relies mainly on on-site staff to draw on their experience and make immediate decisions on temporary measures, such as cordoning off the area. While this approach offers flexibility, we consider that, given the wide distribution of facilities and the complex terrain of country parks, the absence of guidelines or uniform standards for temporary measures may lead to inconsistencies in how staff at different management centres assess risks and adopt temporary measures. Improper staff handling could put public safety at risk.

13. In one case, after the roof of a rain shelter was removed in December 2022, it remained uncovered for a prolonged period of about 18 months because reconstruction could not be scheduled. Although AFCD installed a temporary canopy in July 2024 to safeguard public safety, the long gap between the roof removal and the temporary measures highlights the problems arising from the lack of consistent contingency guidelines and stipulated timelines, causing inconvenience to visitors.

14. In our view, AFCD may consider developing concise, tiered contingency guidelines based on facility types, common types of damage and urgency levels, specifying temporary measures, activation triggers, and time frames for handling common facility damage. AFCD could also incorporate the above guidelines into a standardised internal procedures manual and provide regular training for frontline staff to ensure that management centres take consistent and timely action in similar situations, thereby minimising the impact on visitors.

Establishing an Electronic Maintenance Records and Monitoring System

15. At present, AFCD's maintenance records are mainly maintained by country park management centres and the Engineering Division in separate worksheets or reports. Without a centralised electronic management system, information is scattered

across files of varying formats, making it difficult for AFCD's management personnel to readily grasp the overall situation of maintenance work across all country parks. This fragmentation also prevents the timely identification of prolonged cases or recurring issues, and undermines effective data consolidation and analysis, which in turn hinders monitoring and resource allocation. We note that each year, the management centres and the Engineering Division under AFCD handle a large number of maintenance cases. The absence of a centralised management platform increases the risk of duplicate data entry and data inaccuracies, while weakening the ability of AFCD's management to analyse data by project type, region, or contractor performance, and to prioritise maintenance tasks.

16. We consider that there remains considerable scope to improve AFCD's application of information technology. Establishing a centralised electronic system would facilitate the consolidation of information on each maintenance case, including its status, commencement and completion dates, and the personnel and contractors involved. The system could also feature automated reminder and statistical analysis functions, enabling regular reviews of the overall progress and outcomes of maintenance works, thereby strengthening internal monitoring. AFCD may consider piloting a simplified version of the electronic maintenance records system at selected management centres. If the pilot proves successful, the system could then be progressively extended to other management centres and the Engineering Division, with the ultimate aim of establishing a comprehensive electronic maintenance records and monitoring system.

Incorporating Distance Posts into the Review System and Establishing a Regular Inspection Mechanism

17. Distance posts are essential for hikers to identify their location in the countryside and provide location information in emergencies. Their completeness and the clarity of the information they display are crucial to hiking safety and effective search and rescue operations. Currently, AFCD mainly identifies distance posts requiring maintenance or repair through frontline staff's routine patrols, while its annual review of countryside facilities does not cover distance posts. We also note that distance posts are not included in the routine patrol checklist, so AFCD cannot ensure that frontline staff examine them and properly record their conditions during patrols. We consider that although distance posts are relatively simple and durable, they may still become loose, tilted or illegible due to human or environmental factors. The current practice may therefore fail to identify distance posts requiring maintenance at an early stage, thereby adversely affecting hiking safety and emergency rescue operations.

18. We recommend that, where resources allow, AFCD should consider incorporating all distance posts into the scope of annual reviews, or revising its general guidelines to explicitly list them as facilities that staff must examine during routine patrols. The guidelines should also stipulate the frequency of routine inspections and the methods of record-keeping, to ensure continuous monitoring and timely repairs of distance posts when necessary.

Standardising Facility Review Criteria and Enhancing Training

19. Each year, AFCD conducts regular reviews of major facilities in country parks, with experienced frontline staff inspecting and assessing their condition. However, the current review system is predominantly based on staff judgment and visual checks, without uniform and measurable standards. Assessment criteria are conveyed verbally by district supervisors to staff, instead of being set out in formal written guidelines. As a result, management centres may differ in their assessment criteria, the level of detail recorded, and photographic documentation practices.

20. As country parks contain a wide range of facilities, the review process involves a high degree of subjective judgment, for example, in assessing structural stability, external condition and functional integrity. If management centres apply inconsistent standards for scoring, photographic documentation and note-taking, the resulting records may lack comparability. This reduces the reliability of analyses of overall facility conditions and cross-district comparisons, and it may also affect the prioritisation of subsequent maintenance works.

21. We are pleased to note that AFCD is reviewing the procedures for using review forms and exploring the feasibility of developing scoring criteria or guidelines to improve review accuracy and consistency. AFCD should continue to closely monitor progress to ensure its timely implementation. We recommend that AFCD consider preparing illustrated scoring guidelines categorised by facility type, with clearly explained scoring criteria and examples, and provide regular training or refresher courses for frontline staff to enhance scoring accuracy and record consistency.

(II) Optimising the Management and Monitoring Mechanisms for Outsourced Services

Strengthening Monitoring Mechanisms for Outsourced Services

22. Currently, AFCD outsources the maintenance and cleaning of various country park facilities, including mobile toilets, to contractors. Records show that between 2022 and June 2025, AFCD identified only one case in which toilet cleanliness was unsatisfactory and deducted the contractor's service fees in accordance with the contract terms. Over the same period, AFCD had imposed fee deductions on contractors 27 times for failing to provide the number of cleaners stipulated in the contracts. AFCD stated that none of these cases involved substandard cleaning. However, according to the results of country park surveys conducted by AFCD between 2019 and 2024, about 20% to 50% of the respondents rated the availability and hygiene of country park toilets as "poor" or "very poor", indicating a substantial disparity between the overall quality of cleaning services and public expectations. In addition, we note that the complaints received by AFCD about country park toilets were broadly consistent with the concerns highlighted in the survey results, focusing mainly on hygiene conditions, hardware failures and the operation of water supply systems.

23. We consider that within AFCD's current monitoring system for outsourced services, the assessment criteria for contractor performance place primary emphasis on compliance with contractual requirements, while giving insufficient attention to actual service quality. The Department should review the effectiveness of its existing monitoring framework and continue to collect visitor feedback on an ongoing basis as a supplementary indicator of contractor performance. We are pleased to note that AFCD is planning to revise the contract monitoring system, with the scope of monitoring being broken down into specific aspects such as tidiness, cleaning frequency, staff absence and inspection frequency, with implementation expected to be completed in 2026.

24. We recommend that AFCD consider introducing a contractor performance rating system, with clear and measurable indicators to guide inspectors in deciding whether to issue verbal or written warnings to cleaning contractors, or deduct service fees and terminate contracts. In addition, AFCD may prepare quarterly reports on contractor performance to analyse their overall performance and identify underperforming contractors early. The contractor ratings should be factored into all decisions regarding contract renewal and tendering, to ensure that high-performing contractors are retained while those with poor performance are restricted or delisted. In

reviewing its monitoring system for outsourced services, AFCD may also draw on HAD's contractor registry system and periodic assessment mechanism to strengthen the monitoring and control over service providers.

Greater Flexibility in Engaging Contractors to Enhance Maintenance Efficiency

25. We note that different AFCD divisions and their contractors are responsible for carrying out maintenance works for country park facilities, and the time required for completion varies. The Engineering Division handles large-scale maintenance works that require civil and building engineering expertise. Some works take longer due to factors such as manpower allocation, scheduling, and site locations and conditions. With the growing number of countryside facilities and rising usage, the maintenance workload has inevitably increased, thereby adding pressure on frontline and engineering staff.

26. While ensuring the quality and safety of works, we consider that AFCD should, as resources allow, engage contractors more flexibly to carry out suitable maintenance works, freeing up internal manpower to concentrate on works that require in-house expertise and thereby reducing waiting times for works and improving efficiency.

(III) Enhancing Information Dissemination and Public Communication

Improving the Dissemination and Updating of Information on Facility Closures

27. At present, AFCD mainly shares information about facilities in country parks and special areas with the public through its "Enjoy Hiking" website. The website provides details such as hiking trail guides, locations of recreation sites and notices of temporary facility closures, making it the main source for members of the public to check the status of countryside facilities. However, for some closed trails or facilities, the website simply marks them as "temporarily closed" without indicating expected reopening dates or suggesting alternative routes, which can make it harder for hikers and visitors to plan their routes. We acknowledge that AFCD may, in some cases, face technical constraints, land-related issues or lengthy scheduling processes that make it difficult to provide such details. Even so, we consider that there remains scope for improvement in the completeness and clarity of the information published by AFCD.

28. We also note that the link to the “Country Parks Facilities – What’s New” page is not featured in the main menu or displayed prominently on the “Enjoy Hiking” website, but is instead placed at the bottom of the page under the “Related Links” section. As a result, users may overlook it or need to go through multiple steps to reach the latest information. We recommend that AFCD consider raising the visibility of this page to facilitate easier public access to up-to-date facility information.

29. AFCD has worked with the Lands Department (“LandsD”) to explore the feasibility of including information on facility reopening times, closure areas and alternative routes in LandsD’s “GeoInfo Map”, “Common Spatial Data Infrastructure” and “MyMapHK” mobile map application. We believe this direction is worth supporting, and recommend that AFCD also review how information is currently presented on the “Enjoy Hiking” website. As a first step, more detailed categorisation and clearer presentation of information could be introduced to enhance transparency and timeliness.

Leveraging “iAM Smart” to Enhance Real-Time Information Dissemination

30. We note that members of the public may select and subscribe to different categories of government information through the “iAM Smart” mobile application, a one-stop personalised digital service platform coordinated and managed by the Digital Policy Office (“DPO”). In contrast, AFCD mainly relies on members of the public proactively visiting the “Enjoy Hiking” website to obtain updates on hiking trails and country park facilities, which makes its information dissemination relatively passive. We consider that updates on temporary trail or facility closures for maintenance or safety should be promptly disseminated to visitors, hikers and the public. By using the existing government information integration platform to proactively provide notifications of such updates to relevant subscribers, AFCD could facilitate early adjustment of plans.

31. We recommend that AFCD consider collaborating with the DPO to leverage the messaging and notification functions of “iAM Smart” to deliver key updates on the closure, reopening and access arrangements for hiking trails and country park facilities to subscribers to the relevant categories of notifications.

Consolidating Emergency Helpline Information and Improving On-Site Signage

32. Our investigation revealed that information on the distribution of emergency helplines in country parks is scattered across several government platforms, including

on-site maps in country parks, the Countryside Maps published by LandsD, and the digital maps available on the website of the Office of the Communications Authority (“OFCA”). The “Enjoy Hiking” website only provides a hyperlink to the OFCA’s “Mobile Coverage of Hiking Trails in Country Parks” webpage, without directly displaying the locations of emergency helplines. Some hikers may not be aware of the availability of the digital maps on the OFCA website. Since access to emergency helplines is vital to hiking safety and can be a matter of life and death, such fragmentation of information makes it difficult for users to quickly access the information during emergencies. Any delay in locating an emergency helpline may impede rescue operations where every second counts.

33. We are pleased to note that AFCD has planned to seek advice from the OFCA on adding location markers for emergency helplines on the “Enjoy Hiking” website, and will work with the OFCA and LandsD to explore the feasibility of incorporating this location data into the “GeoInfo Map”, the “Common Spatial Data Infrastructure” and the “MyMapHK” mobile map application, thereby strengthening cross-departmental information integration. We recommend that AFCD accelerate consultations with relevant departments to establish, within a short timeframe, a dedicated page or interactive map on the “Enjoy Hiking” website that consolidates and displays the locations and reference numbers of all emergency helplines, and provides downloadable GPX files for offline access by the public.

34. AFCD may also consider installing clear signs or noticeboards marked “Emergency Helpline” near emergency helplines, using eye-catching colours, directional cues or distance indicators to ensure that users can promptly locate helplines in an emergency.

Expanding Channels to Collect Public Feedback

35. AFCD mainly accepts public feedback on country park facilities via post, fax, email, 1823 mobile app and electronic forms. However, as mobile coverage is limited in some rural areas, hikers may be unable to submit feedback or upload photographs immediately when they discover damaged facilities, which delays notification of maintenance issues and may compromise the accuracy of case records.

36. We consider that AFCD should explore the introduction of more user-friendly reporting channels. For instance, it could collaborate with the OFCA to explore the feasibility of improving mobile network coverage at certain hotspots, or setting up QR

code reporting systems at popular hiking locations and main trailheads. By scanning a QR code, members of the public would be directed to a simplified form interface where they could select the location category, enter a brief description and upload photographs. Even in the event of a brief loss of internet connection, the data could be automatically uploaded to the server for submission once the connection is restored, thereby facilitating timely follow-up action.

Considering Electronic Integration of Complaint Case Records and Enhancing Data Analysis Capabilities

37. AFCD currently keeps a consolidated record of all complaint cases in a single spreadsheet, but this approach lacks automated classification and statistical analysis capabilities, and the complaint records maintained in this way cannot be linked with maintenance or inspection records. We consider that such limitations reduce the Department's efficiency in analysing recurring problems, identifying district-level trends and formulating targeted improvement measures. AFCD should consider integrating complaint records into an electronic maintenance records and monitoring system to enable centralised management, cross-checking and data analysis, which, in turn, allows more effective identification of locations or facility types with recurring problems and enhances monitoring efficiency and accuracy.

38. We recommend that, when developing computer systems, AFCD should consider scalability and reserve interfaces for interoperability with 1823 and other government information systems, so as to promote inter-departmental data sharing and interoperability.

Optimising AFCD's Country Park Survey and Data Analysis Mechanisms

39. AFCD's country park surveys are conducted mainly on autumn and winter weekends. We note that the sample size and survey period are relatively limited, and therefore cannot fully reflect differences in visitor characteristics and group behaviour patterns across different seasons and between weekdays and weekends.

40. We consider that AFCD should review the design and implementation of its current survey and, subject to resource availability, broaden the coverage to include different seasons and weekdays while increasing the sample size, thereby creating a more representative database. Such improvements would enable a better understanding and analysis of the behaviour patterns and facility needs of different visitor groups, and provide a sound basis for future resource planning and management.

41. Furthermore, if AFCD can fully integrate existing technological resources, such as automatic people counters, drone image analysis and public transport data provided by the Transport Department (“TD”), with survey findings for joint analysis, it will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the distribution patterns, travel routes and peak periods of visitors to the countryside, thereby supporting the development of more targeted management measures and publicity strategies.

Enhancing Crowd Management and Transparency by Improving the Release of Visitor Flow Information

42. During major holidays, AFCD collaborates with the Tourism Commission (“TC”) and the Hong Kong Tourism Board to publish visitor flow information for the East Dam area of the High Island Reservoir on relevant websites, enabling the public to better understand on-site conditions and plan their routes. We consider that such arrangements improve information transparency and help manage visitor congestion during peak outdoor seasons. We recommend that AFCD continue and further expand the dissemination of visitor flow information to cover additional peak outdoor seasons and hiking hotspots, and explore ways to improve the timeliness and readability of updates.

(IV) Stepping Up Public Education and Publicity

Raising Hikers’ Awareness of Seeking Help During Emergencies

43. Several government departments have introduced mobile applications that provide hiking safety information and search-and-rescue support. Yet in emergencies, it is crucial that the public not only make good use of the support functions provided by these applications but also have a clear understanding of the most fundamental way to seek help, such as calling emergency numbers. In our view, clearly conveying to the public that hikers should dial 999 or 112 immediately in an emergency in the countryside is particularly important for ensuring their safety.

44. We recommend that AFCD step up promotion of emergency numbers, including 999 and 112, on the “Enjoy Hiking” website, the “Enjoy Hiking” hiker tracking service mobile application, and in related publicity and educational materials. It should also be explained that even in areas not covered by a hiker’s own mobile

network, emergency calls can still be made through other available networks. Such measures would enhance the public's emergency response capabilities and awareness of seeking help when they encounter emergencies in the countryside.

Enhancing the Clarity and Readability of Warning Signs and Publicity Materials

45. Most of the notices and promotional materials displayed by AFCD in country parks are in Traditional Chinese and English. We recommend that AFCD regularly review the effectiveness of warning signs for hikers in country parks, covering their number, location, size, colour, language and presentation. If necessary, slogans could be added, with font contrast improved, and clearer language adopted, other language versions provided as needed, or supplemented with images, symbols and QR codes, to enhance the clarity and readability of the relevant information. In addition, the Department could produce clearer and more accessible educational brochures or electronic publicity materials on hiking safety and environmental protection, for dissemination through channels such as the "Enjoy Hiking" website, the "Enjoy Hiking" hiker tracking service mobile application, country park visitor centres, major trail entrances, relevant government websites and social media platforms, with QR codes linking to relevant websites or informational videos.

46. We are pleased to note that in recent years, AFCD has added QR codes on interpretative signs at certain attractions that direct visitors to the "Enjoy Hiking" website, and has made attraction information available in other languages, to facilitate public access to country park information. We welcome these initiatives, which help enhance the accessibility of information. AFCD could further expand the coverage of such information and strengthen the relevance and visibility of its publicity materials. For example, QR codes could be added to direction signs, warning signs and educational display panels along additional popular hiking routes, so that the public can access relevant information in a timely manner.

Extending Outreach Channels and Enhancing Message Appeal

47. AFCD could consider incorporating major risk factors for accidents, such as steep terrain, strong winds, flash floods, coastal swells or obstructed visibility, into the list of high-risk locations in country parks with records of fatal and serious accidents, in order to strengthen the warning effect. In addition to the existing "Enjoy Hiking" website and social media, AFCD could expand its outreach channels by sharing hiking safety information on more platforms popular among the public, and enhance the

effectiveness and appeal of its publicity materials through short videos, visual content and case stories.

Strengthening On-Site Education and Community-Level Outreach

48. Meanwhile, AFCD could consider assigning additional staff to country parks with high visitor flow, or collaborating with non-governmental conservation organisations and volunteer groups, to set up mobile education stations and run on-site outreach activities, with a focus on explaining environmental protection and safety guidelines to the public and promoting the concept of “Hiking Etiquette”. AFCD may also partner with professional and local organisations to encourage mountaineering clubs, District Councils and community groups to organise hiking safety and conservation activities, thereby strengthening public education at the community level.

(V) Promoting Inter-Departmental Collaboration and Strengthening Enforcement

Improving Inter-Departmental Coordination Mechanisms to Prevent Works Delays

49. A case has shown room for improvement in the existing workflow and allocation of responsibilities for inter-departmental collaboration. The improvement works concerned are coordinated by AFCD, with the Architectural Services Department (“ArchSD”) responsible for refurbishment and the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (“EMSD”) for replacing sewage treatment facilities. However, the works have suffered delays since 2018, as the three departments had to repeatedly redefine technical scopes, revise tender documents and clarify responsibilities, as well as re-prepare documentation following tender cancellations. This situation reveals that inter-departmental collaboration on countryside facilities lacks a standardised workflow, clear time frames and risk management arrangements, which may result in duplicated procedures, time-consuming document exchanges and delays in works scheduling.

50. We also note that although the works involved three departments, namely AFCD, ArchSD and EMSD, progress mainly relied on AFCD, which had to repeatedly initiate correspondence or follow-ups to obtain responses from the other departments. Furthermore, records show that at a later stage of the works, the relevant departments had to engage in multiple rounds of communication due to revisions of technical documents, updates to tender information and reassessment of responsibilities, yet the

process lacked a standardised workflow or regular coordination meetings. Instead, meetings were convened on an ad hoc basis by AFCD, reflecting that the current inter-departmental collaboration model is largely reactive and temporary, without structured procedures. Such a model may impede early risks identification and heighten the likelihood of delays during the preparation and tendering stages of large-scale works.

51. We recommend that when handling countryside facility works involving multiple government departments, AFCD should take a more proactive approach to exploring the establishment of structured coordination and monitoring mechanisms. Examples include setting phased work schedules with clear timelines, holding regular inter-departmental coordination meetings, and exploring the development of a cross-departmental data-sharing platform. Such measures would strengthen monitoring and reduce delays in large-scale maintenance works caused by ineffective inter-departmental communication.

Enhancing Enforcement and Inter-Departmental Patrols to Maintain Cleanliness in Country Parks

52. Based on the information provided by AFCD, between 2020 and 2025, the Department instituted only two prosecutions and issued 164 fixed penalty notices for littering in country parks, averaging about 30 cases per year. We consider that these law enforcement figures appear disproportionate to the more than 10 million annual visits to country parks and the known litter problem, which reflect the insufficiency of the existing enforcement capacity to address the growing patronage and increased use of countryside facilities.

53. According to AFCD, when frontline staff observe littering during patrols in country parks, they issue fixed penalty notices on the spot. We understand that apart from patrol and enforcement, AFCD staff also have to monitor facility conditions and conduct public education. We notice that AFCD flexibly deploys staff in response to operational needs during peak outdoor seasons, to strengthen patrols, outreach and enforcement in country parks. However, some popular sites, such as Sharp Island in Sai Kung and the East Dam of the High Island Reservoir, attract large crowds, and some locations also require sea transport. Relying solely on AFCD's existing manpower limits both the coverage and deterrent effect of enforcement.

54. During site inspections, we noticed that AFCD had carried out joint patrols and public education initiatives with the Marine Department ("MD") and the Police,

which demonstrated the feasibility of inter-departmental collaboration, though such operations were occasional rather than regular. We consider that AFCD should develop targeted enforcement arrangements for peak periods, and strengthen patrols by deploying additional frontline staff based on local conditions, for example, in areas with higher visitor flow such as Sai Kung and Lantau. AFCD should also consider establishing a regular joint patrol mechanism with departments such as the Police, MD and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (“FEHD”), to conduct joint patrols regularly during holidays and peak seasons, thereby strengthening enforcement against non-compliance.

55. On the other hand, according to AFCD statistics, under its publicity and education efforts, the amount of waste collected in country parks and special areas has steadily declined between 2015 and June 2025, suggesting that public education has proven effective in changing behaviour. We believe that education and enforcement should be pursued in tandem. During peak seasons and holidays, AFCD could combine on-site education with enforcement, for example, by setting up temporary education stations along popular hiking trails while deploying staff to patrol and take enforcement action against offences on the spot, ensuring that education takes the lead, with enforcement providing reinforcement. In addition to strengthening public education, we recommend that AFCD regularly analyse violation hotspots and changes in litter volumes, and adjust patrol arrangements and enforcement strategies based on the findings.

56. Moreover, AFCD has indicated to the media in recent months that the coastal area of Sharp Island does not fall within any country park, marine park or marine reserve. At present, the Department relies only on publicity and education initiatives to raise public environmental awareness and encourage the public, when engaging in water activities or observing marine life, to avoid disturbing marine life and adversely affecting the marine ecosystem. To better safeguard coastal ecosystems, AFCD is reviewing its long-term management strategies and exploring the designation of Sharp Island as part of a marine park. We recommend that AFCD expedite this review and exploration to ensure the effective protection of natural ecosystems.

Promptly Establishing and Implementing an Inter-Departmental Accident Notification Mechanism for Country Parks

57. Establishing a clear and regularly operated accident notification mechanism for country parks will help strengthen safety management and risk prevention

capabilities. AFCD has indicated that it will consult with relevant departments to establish such a mechanism, a direction we consider worthy of support. We recommend that AFCD actively follow up on these consultations to put in place, as soon as possible, a clear and regularly operated inter-departmental accident notification mechanism for country parks, and ensure that accident data is available for consolidation and analysis, enabling AFCD to identify potential high-risk sites and recurring accidents at an early stage, and review and improve warning facilities, patrol arrangements and publicity efforts in a timely manner.

Strengthening Inter-Departmental Coordination on Countryside Crowd Management and Public Transport

58. We notice that some popular hiking trails and geopark sites experience significantly increased visitor flows and traffic pressure during holidays and peak outdoor seasons. At certain locations, narrow roads or the involvement of sea transport result in long waiting times, traffic jams and crowd gathering during peak periods. These situations not only affect the convenience of public use of countryside facilities but may also increase safety risks and place stress on the surrounding natural environment.

59. In recent years, TD, AFCD, the Water Supplies Department, the Hong Kong Police Force and TC have piloted or explored a range of crowd and transport management measures at the East Dam of the High Island Reservoir, including increasing public transport services, carrying out road improvement works, and issuing advisories to facilitate visitor dispersal. We consider that such efforts demonstrate initial inter-departmental collaboration in managing visitor flows in the countryside. However, the current arrangements remain largely short-term measures targeted at certain hotspots, and there is still no long-term inter-departmental coordination mechanism to address the rising trend in visitor numbers.

60. We recommend that AFCD strengthen coordination with TD, TC, MD and LandsD, regularly share data on visitor flows and public transport at major hiking hotspots, and develop crowd management plans for peak periods in advance where necessary. To help the public better understand the relevant transport arrangements, AFCD could consider working with TD to provide timely and consistent updates on transport arrangements and traffic news for major popular hiking spots via the “Enjoy Hiking” website.

Recommendations

61. In light of the above, The Ombudsman has made the following 42 recommendations:

- (1) comprehensively review the existing maintenance mechanism for country park facilities to explore setting maintenance time frames or indicators for works of different scales and types, and establish a regular monitoring and notification system to enable early identification and follow-up of delays;
- (2) consider developing a standardised internal procedures manual that clearly sets out the processes for reporting damaged facilities, conducting preliminary assessments, assigning responsibilities and maintaining completion records, and explore setting time frames for each key stage of the maintenance process;
- (3) review the existing criteria for prioritising maintenance works, and consider introducing objective, quantifiable assessment methods and establishing a monitoring mechanism to regularly review and update the prioritisation of maintenance works, so as to ensure the timely repair of damaged countryside facilities;
- (4) develop concise, tiered contingency guidelines based on facility types, common damage categories and urgency levels, specifying the temporary measures, activation triggers and time frames for handling common facility damages, as well as requirements such as taking photographs and completing record forms;
- (5) further to (4), incorporate the relevant contingency guidelines into a standardised internal procedures manual and provide regular training for frontline staff, to ensure that management centres take consistent and timely actions in similar situations;
- (6) consider establishing a centralised system for electronic maintenance records that integrates data on case status, works progress and contractor details, with automatic reminder and statistical analysis functions to facilitate regular reviews of maintenance progress and effectiveness;

- (7) review the current maintenance and inspection arrangements for distance posts, and where resources allow, consider incorporating all distance posts into the scope of annual reviews, revising the general guidelines to explicitly list them as facilities that staff must examine during routine patrols, or stipulating the frequency of routine inspections and the methods of record-keeping, to ensure continuous monitoring and timely repairs of distance posts when necessary;
- (8) closely follow up on the evaluation of the procedures for using review forms and explore the feasibility of developing scoring criteria or guidelines, to ensure the accuracy and consistency of review results;
- (9) consider developing illustrated scoring guidelines for facility reviews, categorised by facility type, with clearly defined “Good/Fair/Poor” standards and examples, and provide regular training or refresher courses for frontline staff;
- (10) review the effectiveness of the current monitoring system for outsourced services, closely follow up on system revisions, and continuously collect visitor feedback as a supplementary indicator of contractor performance;
- (11) consider creating a contractor performance rating system with clear and measurable indicators to assist in monitoring contractor performance and determining whether verbal or written warnings are warranted, or whether further actions such as deducting service fees and terminating contracts should be taken;
- (12) consider preparing quarterly reports on contractor performance to analyse overall performance and identify underperforming contractors early, and ensure that contractor ratings are factored into decisions regarding contract renewal and tendering;
- (13) when reviewing the current monitoring system for outsourced services, consider drawing on HAD’s contractor registry and periodic assessment mechanism, and downgrading or deregistering underperforming contractors, thereby strengthening accountability for those with persistently poor performance;

- (14) where resources permit, consider engaging contractors more flexibly to carry out suitable maintenance works, complementing internal staffing and enhancing overall efficiency;
- (15) review the current presentation of information on the “Enjoy Hiking” website, strengthen the prominence of the “Country Parks Facilities – What’s New” page on the website, and introduce more detailed categorisation and clearer presentation, such as grouping closures by type, indicating closure dates, reasons for closure and reopening schedules, and offering alternative routes with map links;
- (16) consider collaborating with DPO to leverage the messaging and notification functions of “iAM Smart” to deliver time-sensitive updates, including the closure, reopening and access arrangements of hiking trails and country park facilities, to subscribers to the relevant categories of notifications;
- (17) expedite discussions with OFCA and LandsD on the feasibility of including emergency helpline location information in the “GeoInfo Map”, the “Common Spatial Data Infrastructure” and the “MyMapHK” mobile map application;
- (18) further to (17), establish in the near future a dedicated page or interactive map on the “Enjoy Hiking” website that consolidates and displays the locations and numbers of all emergency helplines, and offers downloadable GPX files for offline access by members of the public;
- (19) consider installing clear, multilingual signs or noticeboards near emergency helplines, featuring eye-catching colours, directional cues or distance indicators;
- (20) explore introducing more convenient reporting channels, for example, by working with OFCA to evaluate the feasibility of improving mobile network coverage at popular locations;

- (21) explore setting up QR code reporting systems at popular hiking spots and main trailheads, equipped with an automatic upload function that submits data once the network connection is restored;
- (22) explore integrating complaint records into an electronic maintenance records and monitoring system to enable centralised management, cross-checking and data analysis;
- (23) when developing computer systems, consider scalability and ensure interfaces are included for interoperability with 1823 and other government information systems, so as to promote inter-departmental data sharing and minimise duplicate entry of case data;
- (24) review the design and implementation of the current country park survey, and explore broadening its coverage to include different seasons and weekdays while increasing the sample size;
- (25) explore integrating existing technological resources, such as automatic people counters, drone image analysis and public transport data provided by TD, with survey findings for joint analysis, to identify visitor distribution patterns, travel routes and peak periods;
- (26) continue and expand the dissemination of visitor flow information to cover additional peak outdoor seasons and hiking hotspots, and explore ways to improve the timeliness and clarity of updates;
- (27) step up the promotion of emergency numbers, including 999 and 112, on the “Enjoy Hiking” website, the “Enjoy Hiking” hiker tracking service mobile application, and in related publicity and educational materials, as an important emergency support in addition to mobile applications with hiking safety and search-and-rescue functions;
- (28) regularly review the effectiveness of warning signs for hikers in country parks, covering their number, location, size, colour and wording and, where necessary, add slogans, improve font contrast and adopt clearer language to enhance the warning effect;

- (29) review the language and presentation of warning messages in country parks, and provide other language versions as needed, or supplement them with images, symbols and QR codes, in addition to Traditional Chinese and English, so that users from different language backgrounds can understand the relevant safety and environmental protection messages;
- (30) produce clearer and more accessible educational brochures or electronic publicity materials for dissemination through channels such as the “Enjoy Hiking” website, the “Enjoy Hiking” hiker tracking service mobile application, country park visitor centres, major trail entrances, relevant government websites and social media platforms, incorporating QR codes that link to websites or educational videos;
- (31) extend the use of QR codes beyond interpretative and direction signs to cover more popular hiking trails, warning signs and educational display panels, so as to improve information accessibility;
- (32) consider incorporating major risk factors for accidents into the list of high-risk locations with records of fatal and serious accidents in country parks, to remind hikers of potential safety risks;
- (33) extend outreach channels by sharing hiking safety information on more platforms popular among the public, and enhance the appeal of the publicity through short videos, visual content and case stories;
- (34) consider assigning additional staff to busy country parks, or collaborating with non-governmental conservation organisations and volunteer groups, to set up mobile education stations and run on-site outreach activities;
- (35) consider partnering with professional and local organisations to encourage mountaineering clubs, District Councils and community groups to organise hiking safety and conservation activities, thereby strengthening public education at the community level;

- (36) when handling countryside facility works that involve multiple government departments, consider establishing more structured coordination and monitoring mechanisms, for example, by setting phased work schedules with clear timelines, holding regular inter-departmental coordination meetings, and exploring the development of a cross-departmental data-sharing platform, to strengthen monitoring and reduce delays in large-scale maintenance or improvement works caused by ineffective inter-departmental communication;
- (37) develop special enforcement arrangements for peak periods, with flexible deployment of frontline staff based on local conditions, for example, in areas with higher visitor flow such as Sai Kung and Lantau;
- (38) explore the establishment of a regular joint inspection mechanism with departments such as the Police, MD and FEHD, and carry out joint inspection operations regularly and during peak seasons to strengthen enforcement against littering, illegal fire lighting, unauthorised mooring and acts causing environmental damage;
- (39) regularly analyse violation hotspots and changes in litter volumes, and adjust patrol arrangements and enforcement strategies based on the findings;
- (40) expedite the review of long-term management strategies and explore the designation of Sharp Island as part of a marine park to better protect coastal ecosystems;
- (41) actively follow up on discussions regarding an inter-departmental accident notification mechanism for country parks, with a view to its early establishment and implementation, and enhance the integration and analysis of accident data to improve safety management and accident prevention in country parks; and
- (42) explore ways to enhance coordination with TD, TC, MD and LandsD, regularly share data on visitor flows and public transport at major hiking hotspots, develop crowd management plans for peak periods as necessary (including temporary transport arrangements, diversion measures and information dissemination), and work with TD to explore

publishing updated transport arrangements (such as additional bus or minibus services to and from country parks) and traffic news for major hiking hotspots on the “Enjoy Hiking” website.

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