

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Direct Investigation on Free Admission Scheme for Leisure Facilities from July to September 2008

Background

The Chief Executive announced in his 2007-08 Policy Address on 10 October 2007 a plan to highlight the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a main theme in promoting national education. The object was “so people will understand our country better and have a shared sense of national pride” and to promote sports among the public. To these ends, he announced making available for free public use from 1 July to 30 September 2008 the sports and recreational facilities managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (“LCSD”). At once, LCSD started to plan for the 92-day Free Admission Scheme (“the Scheme”).

2. The Scheme was well intended but received much public criticism, prompting The Ombudsman to initiate a direct investigation into the Scheme, in the hope that this experience could offer useful reference for other projects and similar initiatives in future.

The Scheme

3. The objectives of the Scheme were:

- to support the Beijing Olympic Games;
- to encourage the public to exercise more regularly; and
- to promote community sports.

Planned Arrangements

4. LCSD’s planning took reference from two previous schemes of free admission. We summarise the main features of the three schemes:

	Post-SARS Free Admission in 2003	Celebration of 10th Anniversary of HKSAR in 2007	The Scheme in 2008
Duration	Five public holidays in July (including four Sundays)	Two public holidays (1-2 July)	92 days from July to September
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indoor leisure facilities - Swimming pools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indoor leisure facilities - Swimming pools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indoor leisure facilities - Swimming pools - Outdoor leisure facilities (excluding sports grounds and turf pitches) - Water sports centres facilities - Holiday camps
Sessions Available	112,835	76,783	Over 3,000,000
Booking Channels for Facilities other than Swimming Pools	Free permits pre-distributed at venues	LCSD counters	All booking channels under Leisure Link System (“LLS”): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Counters - Internet - Telephone - Self-service kiosks (launched on 3 March 2008)
Booking Period	Monday before each free-admission day	7 days in advance	30 days in advance

5. **Enhancement of Booking Channels.** Since migration to GovHK, Government’s one-stop portal, in January 2008, LLS has been enhanced to ensure system stability and to reduce processing time for all booking channels. In May 2008, in anticipation of overwhelming response to the Scheme, LCSD further enhanced the system to reduce the average transaction time of each internet booking by 30 seconds, from 2.5 to 2 minutes, and to increase correspondingly the number of concurrent users from 800 to 1,100.

6. **Prevention of Abuse.** Measures were introduced to prevent abuse of the Scheme: (a) each person could book a maximum of two sessions a day, irrespective of facilities; and (b) a minimum number of users was required for some facilities.

7. **Publicity.** LCSD announced details for free use of camp facilities on 3 March 2008, as application for such facilities for July could be made before 31 March. Details of the Scheme were announced in the second round of publicity launched on 9 May 2008. Publicity was

conducted through the media, posters, banners, leaflets and newspaper advertisements. A specially designed LCSD webpage was launched for the Scheme. Radio Announcements of Public Interest (“APIs”) publicised the Scheme from 29 May to 30 September 2008.

Improvement during the Scheme Period

8. **Monitoring of Attendance.** LCSD’s original plan was for venues to collate statistics on usage and absence of original hirers and report to the Headquarters monthly. Upon public criticism since booking started in June, LCSD revised the arrangements and required venues to provide statistics on a daily basis from 1 July 2008.

9. **Cancellation of Bookings.** Normally, hirers may request cancellation of bookings in writing, but there will be no refund. Requests for a change of time for a confirmed booking are deemed by LCSD to be cancellation. However, this is only briefly mentioned among other matters in the Conditions of Use for Leisure Facilities. Meanwhile, information on LCSD website states that since a hirer has already paid for the booking, it cannot be changed or cancelled. Having considered complaints and suggestions about the Scheme, LCSD made available at venues a standard form from 18 July 2008 to facilitate cancellation, so as to release vacated sessions for booking by others. Completed forms or cancellation requests in writing could be sent to the venues concerned for processing.

10. **Other Measures to Prevent Wastage.** Since mid-July 2008, greater flexibility was exercised in the use of vacant sessions of land-based facilities. Lanes in swimming pools reserved for groups or programmes, but with low attendance, would be released for use by the public.

Usage

Attendances

11. The Scheme attracted over 12.8 million attendances, including more than 7.62 million to swimming pools and more than 5 million to land-based facilities. For the around 322,000 hirers of land-based facilities, about 50% (or 161,000) had not booked any LCSD facilities in the previous 12 months.

Booking Channels

12. The total number of over 2,489,000 bookings through the four channels under the Scheme was doubled, when compared with the same period in 2007.

Facilities

13. Except holiday camps which had a three percent point decrease in usage compared to the same period in 2007, all other facilities: every land-based facility, water sports centres and swimming pools, registered increased usage. Some increases were fairly significant, e.g. swimming pool attendances surged 68% and overall land-based facilities increased 26 percent point to 76%.

14. However, wastage could be serious. For land-based facilities, most were booked over 90% under the Scheme. Of these booked sessions, an average of 62% were used by original hirers, 16% by walk-in users and the remaining 22% unused. This indicated an absence rate of original hirers of 38%. Some situations were even more serious. Our spot check revealed 74% and 78% no-show rate on some days in certain facilities of a sports centre. The absence rate of original hirers of craft at water sports centres even reached 54%.

Review and Evaluation

15. Since its launch, the Scheme received much criticism from the public. LCSD received a total of 1,059 complaints about the Scheme. Most were related to difficulty in booking, lack of safeguard against abuse and wastage from no-show, and congestion in on-line booking.

16. This Office received 33 complaints from June to September 2008 about the Scheme on issues similar to those received by LCSD.

17. We received 23 public submissions for this direct investigation. Most of them offered views similar to those expressed in complaints but seven were in praise of the Scheme for taking care of the needs of the less well-off in the community and encouraging people to exercise more. LCSD also received 20 submissions in praise of the Scheme from different channels.

Suggestions for Improvement

18. During the interim review in early July 2008, LCSD considered the suggestions for improvement raised by the public not suitable for implementation for the remaining period of the Scheme.

19. By March 2009, LCSD was in the final stage of completing a preliminary evaluation report on the Scheme. LCSD indicated that some of the suggestions could be helpful for similar events in future, provided certain hurdles were overcome and sufficient resources made available.

LCSD will take into account the recommendations of this direct investigation before deciding on the improvement measures.

Observations and Opinions

Objectives of the Scheme

20. The increase in usage of most facilities and the fact that over half of the hirers of land-based facilities under the Scheme were “infrequent hirers” proved that the Scheme had succeeded in promoting interest in sports and exercise. The Scheme was clearly welcome by many, as reflected by the support voiced by some members of the public, and by others implicitly through participation.

21. In principle and in concept, we consider the Scheme laudable. The objectives are certainly positive. Given the considerable scale and duration of the Scheme launched in the summer months, it was no easy task for LCSD. Broadly speaking, LCSD has discharged itself commendably. Nevertheless, there were deficiencies in arrangements.

Planning

22. LCSD had deployed high-level subject officers, under the leadership of an Assistant Director, to plan and execute the Scheme and also to monitor implementation. The team generally did well in the latter task: keeping a watching brief to make changes in some arrangements from mid-July.

23. **Booking.** In estimating usage of facilities under the Scheme, LCSD had sensibly not only drawn reference from the two previous schemes, but particularly assessed the popularity of various facilities. For greater public convenience, in view of the large volume of sessions available for booking over a considerable duration, it decided to use all four established booking channels instead of just one single booking channel as had been done for the previous two schemes.

24. LCSD upgraded the LLS internet booking channel to cater for the anticipated significant increase in booking under the Scheme. However, owing to the limited supply of popular facilities and sessions, free admission would inevitably occasion a surge in booking attempts during the peak time. LCSD’s consideration on enhancing the booking capacity was a matter of judgment on striking a balance between prudent use of public resources, convenience to the public and equal opportunities in making booking for a one-off scheme of three months.

25. We accept that LCSD had taken realistic and reasonable steps — as indicated in its planned schedule for LLS enhancement, testing and rolling-out — to plan carefully for the anticipated influx of bookings under the Scheme.

26. **Publicity.** The publicity plan of the Scheme did not anticipate the need for changes after the Scheme's roll-out. As a result, interim measures and special arrangements during the Scheme were not fully publicised.

27. **Monitoring.** The initial plan of collating monthly statistics indicated not only an under-estimation of the size of the wastage problem due to no-show but low alertness of the need for close monitoring of the demand for facilities upon roll-out of the Scheme.

Execution

28. **Publicity.** In the execution stage, LCSD failed to publicise its interim measures, to promote the less popular facilities and to address the public outcry through the media. It may not be easy to incorporate changes into pre-printed materials such as posters and leaflets, but newspapers and the electronic media could have helped relay more effectively messages at short notice, in different stages during the Scheme.

29. **Monitoring.** Despite deficiencies in planning, LCSD is commended for acting promptly to rectify defects once detected. Monthly monitoring of usage was quickly upgraded to daily monitoring, a standard form for cancellation was introduced at an early stage and the initial requirement for a minimum number of users, introduced for preventing abuse, was soon relaxed.

Prevention of Abuse

30. **Cancellation of Bookings.** LCSD had clearly under-estimated the incidence of no-show by original hirers, which reached 38% for land-based facilities, and thus had no plan for publicising or streamlining the arrangements for cancelling bookings. However, the Department was quick to identify and rectify this by introducing a cancellation form from 18 July.

31. On the other hand, the procedures for cancellation were fraught with deficiencies and were not user-friendly. The form was not available for downloading from the LCSD website. There was little publicity. The low cancellation figures speak for the ineffectiveness of the procedures: 420 cancellations, or 0.05%, *versus* about 800,000 no-shows.

32. To some extent, the incidence of notified cancellation does indicate that responsible hirers were prepared to take the extra time and trouble to release their booked sessions for others. We applaud their civic-mindedness. LCSD should streamline the procedures and properly publicise the cancellation arrangements even for normal fee-paying bookings.

33. **Usage of Facilities.** The high no-show rate of original hirers and high wastage rate of booked sessions, even taking into account subsequent walk-in uses, indicated a sheer waste of public resources. LCSD should look into these cases, identify the reasons for the high no-show rates and work out preventive and promotional measures for future schemes of this nature.

34. LCSD should also consider public education messages for responsible use of public facilities.

35. For facilities such as fitness rooms, sport climbing walls and craft at water sports centres, where booking rates were low due to the requirement of proof of proficiency, corresponding training sessions, with proper promotion, might help boost interest and usage in these activities.

Review and Evaluation

36. LCSD has been quick to review its arrangements albeit in response to complaints and criticisms. It has considered comments and suggestions raised by the public, some of which would involve costly and time-consuming changes to the booking or refund systems. It would not be realistic, or worthwhile, to introduce these mid-way during the Scheme. However, these suggestions are well worth studying for similar initiatives in the future.

Revised Scheme

37. To encourage the public to exercise and to maximise use of under-utilised facilities, we see a case for a scheme on a smaller scale and on a regular basis. A good example is the free access to LCSD museums every Wednesday. LCSD should consider exploring other options, bearing the main considerations of: (a) access on a regular basis, not *ad hoc*; and (b) measures against abuse and wastage.

38. We note LCSD's scheme since 2000 for schools and organisations to use some under-utilised facilities during non-peak hours free of charge. It should publicise the scheme more widely and consider extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries. We believe that with more prudent planning, infrequent users thus attracted could be managed without undue interference with the frequent and paying patrons.

Recommendations

39. Initiatives like the Scheme have demonstrably helped to generate public interest in sports and LCSD facilities. However, the Scheme has also attracted some outcry of public dissatisfaction. From our findings, The Ombudsman makes the following recommendations:

- (1) When planning for similar initiatives, care should be taken to balance the interests of both regular paying patrons and prospective clientele attracted by free admission.
- (2) To build in flexibility in both planning and execution of publicity arrangements for timely and effective announcement of changes, interim measures and special arrangements.
- (3) To build in mechanism for close monitoring of implementation, right from the outset.
- (4) To provide user-friendly arrangements for cancellation of bookings both during normal fee-paying days and for free admission schemes.
- (5) To appeal to the public for responsible use of public facilities.
- (6) To institute safeguards for detecting, deterring and preventing abuse.
- (7) To keep a watching brief on the commercial booking services at a charge.
- (8) To analyse the data on usage of facilities and booking channels to devise incentives for use of under-utilised facilities.
- (9) To consider promoting the existing Free Use Scheme more widely and extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries to maximise the usage of under-utilised facilities.

40. LCSD has accepted all the recommendations. We will monitor progress of implementation.

Office of The Ombudsman
March 2008