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(ACE Paper 19/97)

for advice

PROPOSAL FOR OPENING ACE MEETINGS TO THE PUBLIC

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to seek Members' views on whether this Council should have its meetings opened to the public in future as a means to increase its transparency.

BACKGROUND

2. At its meeting on 18 February 1997, the LegCo Panel on Home Affairs Subcommittee on Review of Advisory and Statutory Bodies (LegCo HA Panel Subcommittee) considered, inter alia, the transparency measures ACE has been adopting thus far and suggested that ACE should reconsider the possibility of opening meetings to the public. In this connection, the LegCo HA Panel Subcommittee suggested ACE to make reference to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council's (HKADC) Standing Orders Governing the Opening of Meetings of the Full Council and Transparency, to see if similar arrangements could be adopted by ACE. The relevant section of HKADC's Standing Orders is extracted at Annex for Members' reference.

PREVIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

3. The proposal for opening meetings to the public has previously been discussed at ACE meeting on 21 November 1994. The proposal was not pursued then as the majority view did not favour the proposal. The main concerns of Members at that time were :

- (a) meetings of most advisory bodies were not open to public;
- (b) in addition to making agendas, papers and confirmed minutes of meetings (ACE documents) available for public inspection, the ACE Chairman would also meet the press after each meeting. These measures should be sufficient for keeping the mass media and the public informed of the works done by ACE. Also, the public should not be too interested in the facts and details (usually highly technical) exchanged during meetings; and
- (c) ACE could best fulfil its functions if Members felt able to speak freely in a non-political and non-partisan manner.

PRESENT POSITION

4. As at August 1996, there were altogether 288 advisory and statutory bodies. Of these, 118 (around 40%) have open meetings and they include the Housing Authority and the District Boards. Those which have not yet opened their meetings to the public include the Transport Advisory Committee, Trade Advisory Board and the Industry and Technology Development Council.

5. At present, there are various channels where the public could gain access to information relating to ACE meetings, as below :

- (a) the ACE Secretariat would make available all the ACE documents (except confidential ones) for public inspection upon request;
- (b) there is the meet-the-press session after each ACE meeting when ACE Chairman would brief the press on ACE's views on issues. Copies of ACE documents are also provided to reporters on that occasion. Press coverage has generally been good;
- (c) various trade associations, such as the Federation of Hong Kong Industries and Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, have been receiving copies of the ACE documents for record on a regular basis; and
- (d) it is understood that some green groups, such as the Friends of the Earth, are keeping the ACE documents in their libraries for public reference.

6. As a further step to increase transparency, consideration will be given to publish an index of ACE papers on the Internet.

ADVICE SOUGHT

7. In view of the LegCo HA Panel Subcommittee's request for a review, Members are requested to advise whether ACE meetings should be open to the public, taking into account the present situation.

Planning, Environment and Lands Branch
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