

LCQ19: Operation of shops in Hong Kong

Following is a question by the Hon Andrew Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Algernon Yau, in the Legislative Council today (June 19):

Question:

It has been reported that as Hong Kong people continue to go north and travel abroad in recent months, the local market is sluggish, and the wave of shop closures in Hong Kong has aroused concern. Some netizens have created a concern group on social media for information on shop closures, which has attracted nearly 300 000 subscribers in just two weeks. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has compiled statistics on the numbers of shop closures and openings in Hong Kong in the past three years, together with a breakdown by business type, such as catering, retail, and personal care services (e.g. hair cutting, beauty services);

(2) whether it has compiled statistics on the shop vacancy rates for the first and second quarters of this year, and how such data compare with the relevant data during the epidemic; whether it has forecast the data on shop vacancy rates for the coming quarters; and

(3) whether it has studied the reasons for the recent wave of shop closures in Hong Kong, and what counter-measures are in place to address the situation?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Environment and Ecology Bureau and the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), the consolidated reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

The Government does not compile statistics on the numbers of shop closures and openings in Hong Kong.

As regards the number of establishments in the relevant industries, according to the results of the Quarterly Survey of Employment and Vacancies of the C&SD, as at end 2023, the number of establishments in the industries of food and beverage services, retail trade, and beauty and body prettifying treatment (including hairdressing treatment) in Hong Kong was around 17 900, 65 600 and 12 300 respectively. The number of establishments of these industries had once recorded a drop owing to the impact of the epidemic in the last few years, but it has rebounded since the end of 2021 to remain stable with the epidemic subsiding in recent years. In addition, new food and

beverage restaurant brands gradually set up businesses in Hong Kong in recent years, which reflects their confidence in the prospects of the local catering business.

As regards the leasing situation of private shops, according to the latest data released by a real estate services organisation, the street shop vacancy rate has improved from 18.3 per cent in the third quarter of 2020 (the highest level during the epidemic) to 6.6 per cent in the first quarter of 2024. The vacancy rate in some of the core districts (such as Causeway Bay and Tsim Sha Tsui) was even lower than 6.6 per cent.

The closures and openings of shops are business decisions that involve various factors, including the business operating environment, changes in consumers' demands as well as the operating conditions of the enterprises. The Government does not compile relevant statistics or conduct research. As regards the leasing situation of shops in the private market, the Government is of the view that it should be market-driven, allowing private organisations to make adjustments having regard to the actual market conditions (such as location and vacancy rate of shops).

In recent years, the consumption pattern of residents and inbound visitors keeps on changing and some of the Hong Kong residents increase their spending in the Mainland, posing challenges to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the retail sector. The Government has been providing assistance to SMEs, including those in the retail sector, having regard to the economic situation and the needs of the trade, with a view to helping them cope with liquidity shortage, and encouraging them to enhance their competitiveness and develop more diversified markets, including providing low-interest concessionary loans to SMEs through the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme (SFGS) to assist them in coping with cash flow problems. As at end March 2024, a total of nearly \$19 billion of loans has been approved under the SFGS for SMEs in the retail sector, benefitting over 6 000 retail enterprises and nearly 53 000 employees. In view of the ongoing challenges faced by SMEs, the Government extends in this year's Budget the application period for the 80% and 90% Guarantee Products under the SFGS for two years to end March 2026, so as to assist more SMEs (including those in the retail sector) in coping with cash flow problems.

At the same time, the Government has also been actively supporting SMEs to carry out promotion activities and develop their businesses. Among others, the SME Export Marketing Fund (EMF) provides funding support for SMEs to participate in export promotion activities to expand their markets outside Hong Kong. The funding scope has been expanded following the implementation of the special measure from April 30, 2021, to June 30, 2026, to cover large-scale exhibitions and online exhibitions targeting the local market. As at end April 2024, the EMF has approved more than 31 400 applications from the wholesale and retail sector, benefitting over 6 800 enterprises and involving a total funding of nearly \$700 million.

Hong Kong's economy has been recovering steadily in the past year. In the first quarter of this year, the real gross domestic product grew by 2.7

per cent over the preceding year, marking the fifth consecutive quarter of growth. Some recent data show that the economic performance remains positive in general, including the increase in the number of inbound visitors and the continuous improvement in the exports of goods. The forecast of economic growth for 2024 is maintained at 2.5 per cent to 3.5 per cent.

Along with the rise in employment earnings, the recent stabilisation of asset markets and the further revival in inbound tourism with the number of visitors expected to increase by 35 per cent to 46 million in 2024 as compared with that in 2023, coupled with the Government's continued efforts in promoting mega event economy and stimulating consumption sentiment and the Central Government's further enhancement to the Individual Visit Scheme by extending its scope from 49 to 59 cities to cover all provincial capitals in the country, the local retail sector will be given a greater impetus of recovery.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the situation, and assist SMEs in riding out the storm having regard to the situation.

[Inspection of aquatic products imported from Japan](#)

In response to the Japanese Government's plan to discharge nuclear-contaminated water at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene issued a Food Safety Order which prohibits all aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds originating from the 10 metropolis/prefectures, namely Tokyo, Fukushima, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Chiba, Gunma, Tochigi, Niigata, Nagano and Saitama, from being imported into and supplied in Hong Kong.

For other Japanese aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds that are not prohibited from being imported into Hong Kong, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department will conduct comprehensive radiological tests to verify that the radiation levels of these products do not exceed the guideline levels before they are allowed to be supplied in the market.

As the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water is unprecedented and will continue for 30 years or more, the Government will closely monitor and step up the testing arrangements. Should anomalies be detected, the Government does not preclude further tightening the scope of the import ban.

From noon on June 18 to noon today (June 19), the CFS conducted tests on the radiological levels of 243 food samples imported from Japan, which were of the "aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt" category. No

sample was found to have exceeded the safety limit. Details can be found on the CFS's thematic website titled "Control Measures on Foods Imported from Japan"

(www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme_rafs/programme_rafs_fc_01_30_Nuclear_Event_and_Food_Safety.html).

In parallel, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has also tested 50 samples of local catch for radiological levels. All the samples passed the tests. Details can be found on the AFCD's website (www.afcd.gov.hk/english/fisheries/Radiological_testing/Radiological_Test.html).

The Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) has also enhanced the environmental monitoring of the local waters. No anomaly has been detected so far. For details, please refer to the HKO's website (www.hko.gov.hk/en/radiation/monitoring/seawater.html).

From August 24 to noon today, the CFS and the AFCD have conducted tests on the radiological levels of 60 326 samples of food imported from Japan (including 39 003 samples of aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt) and 14 890 samples of local catch respectively. All the samples passed the tests.

[Appeal for information on missing man in Tseung Kwan O \(with photo\)](#)

Police today (June 19) appealed to the public for information on a man who went missing in Tseung Kwan O.

Mui Pak-lam, aged 86, went missing after he left his residence on Ngan O Road yesterday (June 18) morning. His family made a report to Police on the same day.

He is

He is about 1.7 metres tall, 60 kilograms in weight and of thin build. He has a square face with yellow complexion and short white hair. He was last seen wearing a grey T-shirt, grey pants, black shoes and carrying a dark blue sling bag.

Anyone who knows the whereabouts of the missing man or may have seen him is urged to contact the Regional Missing Persons Unit of Kowloon East on 3661 0316 or 9020 2746 or email to rmpu-ke-2@police.gov.hk, or contact any police station.



LCQ6: Waiting time for ordinary family applicants for public rental housing

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Man-kwong and a reply by the Acting Secretary for Housing, Mr Victor Tai, in the Legislative Council today (June 19):

Question:

It is learnt that the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) releases the average waiting time (AWT) for general applicants for public rental housing (PRH) and for the elderly one-person applicants among them on a regular basis, but not ordinary family applicants among the general applicants. There are views pointing out that given the shorter AWT for elderly one-person applicants, the AWT for general applicants has been reduced. As a result, the AWT for ordinary family applicants cannot be accurately reflected. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the AWT for ordinary family applicants as at the first quarter of this year;
- (2) of the latest AWT for ordinary family applicants, with a breakdown by the four districts where PRH estates are distributed (i.e. Urban, Extended Urban, New Territories, and Islands); and
- (3) whether the HA has considered releasing the AWT for ordinary family applicants on a regular basis to enhance the transparency of the relevant information; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Leung Man-kwong is as follows:

It is the objective of the Government and the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) to provide public rental housing (PRH) to low-income families who cannot afford private rental accommodation. We have been striving to ensure that PRH applicants could receive a flat offer as soon as possible. To this end, the HA has compiled the average waiting time (AWT) to reflect the waiting time of PRH general applicants who were given the first flat offer in the past 12 months. For the purpose of enhancing transparency, the HA would announce the latest number of PRH applications and AWT of general applicants at the end of each quarter. Specifically, the AWT is calculated as the average of the waiting time of general applicants who were housed to PRH in the past 12 months, and refers to the time taken between registration for PRH and first flat offer, excluding any frozen period during the application period (e.g. when the applicant has not yet fulfilled the residence requirement; the applicant has requested to put his/her application on hold pending arrival of family members for family reunion; the applicant is imprisoned, etc). According to this calculation methodology, the AWT only reflects the situation of general applicants who were housed to PRH within the past 12 months and it does not provide any indication as to the AWT in the future. Therefore, it should not be taken to project the time required for housing PRH applicants who are currently waiting on the queue.

Against the above objective and calculation methodology of the AWT, my consolidated reply to the questions raised by Hon Leung Man-kwong is as follows:

As mentioned above, as the AWT only reflects the situation of general applicants who were housed to PRH within the past 12 months and it should not be taken to project the time required for housing PRH applicants who are on the queue. For the applicants, their waiting time is affected by a number of factors, including the number of PRH flats available for allocation, the number of PRH applicants, the applicants' district choice, whether the supply of new and refurbished PRH flats matches with the applicants' district choice, etc. If we derive a separate AWT for each district and applicant type, the number of cases involved in each category will be relatively small. As a result, the relevant AWT will fluctuate greatly due to different factors. For example, there are only around tens of general applicants that are housed to the Islands district each year, the AWT calculated based on a small number of cases is prone to large fluctuations. Therefore, it is considered that there is not much meaning in the AWT calculated based on applicant types and selected districts and it will also mislead the applicants.

For individual applicants, the latest allocation status of PRH

applications of various household sizes in various districts can better enable them to estimate the waiting time required to be housed. In this regard, the Housing Department (HD) would publish in newspapers the latest allocation status of different family sizes in each district on a monthly basis, and would upload relevant information to the HA's/HD's website for applicants' reference. The information is presented by district (i.e. Urban, Extended Urban, New Territories and Islands) and family size such that applicants can refer to the latest allocation status of their selected district and family size, including the highest application number that has been allocated with PRH or is being subject to detailed vetting. The information published is clear and transparent.

Furthermore, general applicants can also make reference to the future PRH supply in different districts so as to estimate their waiting time. To this end, the Housing Bureau (HB) would update and publish the public housing production forecast for the next five years on a quarterly basis, and would upload the relevant public housing project information (including project name, location, estimated number of flats completion year, etc.) on HB's website. At the same time, the Development Bureau would also update the public housing project information for the next six to ten years on an annual basis for public reference.

We would publish the analysis of AWT movements annually. The annual analysis of the AWT in 2023 indicates that the waiting time of PRH applicants for flats in the New Territories is generally shorter than those for flats in Urban district or Extended Urban district by a year. Looking ahead, as there will be more new PRH flats supply in the New Territories, it is envisaged that applicants for PRH flats in the New Territories will be allocated with PRH flats earlier.

We have been striving to provide information that is relevant and of reference value to PRH applicants. On this, HB has published the "Composite Waiting Time for Subsidised Rental Housing" on a quarterly basis after the Chief Executive announced in 2022 Policy Address the construction of Light Public Housing (LPH). By making reference to the figure, the public could tell the average waiting time of the general applicants for receiving the first offer of PRH or LPH units in the past 12 months, so that they can evaluate the Government's effectiveness in improving the living conditions of the public through the provision of different types of subsidised rental housing in a more comprehensive manner.

LCQ5: Road Safety Towns

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Ngan Man-yu and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Mr Lam Sai-hung, in the Legislative Council today (June 19):

Question:

In Hong Kong, there are a total of three Road Safety Towns (Towns) located respectively in North Point, Sau Mau Ping and Shatin. The first Town, which was built as early as in the 1970s, has been providing a simulated road environment to enable school children to learn road safety through playing. It is learnt that the operation of the Towns (e.g. facility management, repair and maintenance, education work and the overall strategy for road safety education) has been put under different government departments. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the effectiveness assessment of the work of each Town in the past three years, including the number of attendances of organisations and members of the public, details of activities organised (including the number and content of such activities), publicity and promotional efforts, road safety education efforts, etc.;

(2) as there are views that the software and hardware of various Towns have not been upgraded for many years, whether the authorities have plans to comprehensively upgrade the software and hardware of the Towns (including the facilities and teaching methods), e.g. by introducing technologies such as augmented reality (AR) interactive experiences and procuring more simulated transport vehicles of different types, so as to integrate new technologies with road safety education, thereby making teaching and learning fun and authentic; and

(3) of the measures in place to enhance interdepartmental collaboration within the Government for better coordination and division of work among departments, thereby ensuring that any measure to upgrade the Towns can be truly implemented to enrich the learning experience of school children in the Towns?

Reply:

President,

Road Safety Towns (RSTs) are recreational facilities to impart road safety knowledge to children. RSTs were incorporated into the plans of the former Urban Services Department as early as the late 1960s. The first RST was completed and opened in 1970, and the subsequent RSTs have been implemented in accordance with the planning of the former Urban Council. Currently there are three RSTs in Hong Kong, located at Pak Fuk Road in North Point, Sau Ming Road in Kwun Tong and Kong Pui Street in Sha Tin (Note 1). Each RST provides a simulated road environment to educate children of knowledge on road safety, which can be extended to their family members, with the aim to widely promote the awareness on road safety. Having consulted the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), our consolidated reply is set out below:

The facilities of RST are managed by the LCSD. Schools or groups may apply for a visit at designated times. The RST is open for public use when there is no group visit. In addition, the HKPF makes use of the classrooms

and facilities in the RSTs to provide road safety education service to school groups (including kindergarten to primary school students).

In the past three years, owing to the outbreak of the COVID-19, the number of users of the RSTs was affected in 2021 and 2022, and rebounded after the society has gradually returned to full normalcy from 2023 onwards. Details are set out as follows:

Year 2023	Number of group visits	Number of users (Individuals and groups)
Pak Fuk Road, North Point	227	25 499
Sau Ming Road, Kwun Tong	135	25 664
Kong Pui Street, Sha Tin	178	161 879
Wu Shan Recreation Playground, Tuen Mun	103	45 095

Year 2022 (Note 2)	Number of group visits	Number of users (Individuals and groups)
Pak Fuk Road, North Point	7	12 854
Sau Ming Road, Kwun Tong	0	9 199
Kong Pui Street, Sha Tin	1	88 866
Wu Shan Recreation Playground, Tuen Mun	0	37 198

Year 2021 (Note 2)	Number of group visits	Number of users (Individuals and groups)
Pak Fuk Road, North Point	0	17 740
Sau Ming Road, Kwun Tong	0	10 539
Kong Pui Street, Sha Tin	0	130 999
Wu Shan Recreation Playground, Tuen Mun	0	43 086

The Road Safety Council (the Council) is an advisory body to the Government for promoting road safety. The Council is chaired by a representative of the HKPF, with official members from seven government bureaux and departments, including the Transport and Logistics Bureau, the HKPF, the Transport Department, the Education Bureau, the Home Affairs Department, the Highways Department and the Information Services Department. The Council also includes members from various sectors of the community, such

as the automobile, logistics, medical, insurance and education. The Road Safety Campaign Committee (the Committee) is set up under the Council with an aim to promote road safety education and publicity programmes to road users. As far as Road Safety Towns are concerned, the Committee provides a platform for various government departments as well as members of the Council and the Committee to exchange views on upgrading the facilities of the RSTs so that the relevant departments can coordinate with one another to enhance the user experience in the RSTs.

Currently, we are actively exploring with the LCSD and the members of the Committee, including the HKPF, the possibility of refurbishing or acquiring additional hardware and software facilities for the RSTs. For instance, the Government is working with the Committee to explore the incorporation of the Council's mascot "Mr. Safegg" in the RSTs, so as to attract more visits and "check-ins", as well as the use of virtual reality games developed by the Council for the road safety education service in the RSTs to make it more interesting. Besides, the Government is actively following up with the Committee to explore the feasibility and priority of refurbishing or adding different facilities, taking into account the conditions of the existing facilities, their utilisation rates and the resources required.

Thank you, President.

Note 1: The RST located in Wu Shan Recreation Playground in Tuen Mun has been temporarily closed since late October 2023 to cope with the railway construction of the Tuen Mun South Extension.

Note 2: Number of users in 2021 and 2022 were lower than those in 2023, mainly due to the intermittent closure of venues during the outbreak of the COVID-19.