

LC: Speech by Acting CS in presenting Government Minute in response to Report No. 81 of Public Accounts Committee

Following is the speech (translated from Chinese) by the Acting Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Cheuk Wing-hing, in presenting the Government Minute in response to Report No. 81 of the Public Accounts Committee in the Legislative Council today (May 22):

President,

Laid on the table today is the Government Minute (GM) responding to Report No. 81 of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) presented to the Legislative Council on February 21, 2024.

I welcome the Report of the PAC and am grateful for the time and efforts devoted by the Chairman of the PAC, Hon Shiu Ka-fai, and members of the PAC. The Government accepts the PAC's various recommendations and sets out in detail in the GM the specific responses of the relevant bureau and departments (B/Ds). The PAC conducted public hearings on the chapters on "Licensing of food premises" and "Maintenance and modernisation of lifts and escalators in public rental housing estates". I would like to highlight the key measures taken and progress made by the Government and relevant organisations in response to the recommendations.

Licensing of food premises

Regarding the work on licensing for food premises, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has taken various measures to actively implement the recommendations raised by the PAC and the Audit Commission, with a view to enhancing the licensing procedures, improving work efficiency, and facilitating compliance with relevant requirements by all parties.

Regarding the processing of applications for new food business licences, the FEHD has set up a working group with relevant departments to expedite the implementation of an electronic referral system, to enhance the efficiency of departmental consultation. The departments are expected to enhance their communications and start referring applications electronically from the second quarter of this year. The FEHD has also strengthened communication with licence applicants to confirm early whether an Application Vetting Panel meeting is necessary in respect of their licence application so as to make suitable arrangements. Applicants can also check the application progress through the Online Licence Services system of the FEHD.

Regarding the information system, the FEHD has enhanced its Licence

Management Information System (LMIS) such that it can automatically record the key timestamps of the application process for directly calculating the processing time and issuing email alerts to remind frontline staff when their cases are approaching the deadlines of performance pledges. The LMIS 3 is scheduled to be rolled out in 2025 to improve work efficiency by making use of the business process management system to monitor the processing of existing licences and permits, including renewal and transfer cases. Starting from the second quarter of 2024, the FEHD will issue all food business licences or permits through electronic means for further convenience and benefits to the trade and society.

In terms of performance reporting, the FEHD has reviewed the calculation method of processing time for food business licence applications since this year, including using the time of approval as the calculation basis, to include cases which straddled over different years in the calculation, etc in order to reflect the situation more comprehensively and accurately. The FEHD will continue to enhance internal operational guidelines and strengthen staff training, by requesting frontline staff to follow departmental guidelines in processing licence or permit applications and to provide timely reports on case progress to their supervisors.

In addition to the above measures, the FEHD will continue to optimise the food business licensing regime. The FEHD introduced the Professional Certification System with a "licence first, inspection later" approach earlier to shorten the licence processing time, and has further expanded its scope to cover general restaurants since February 2024, in addition to light refreshment restaurants and food factories. Furthermore, the FEHD extensively relaxed the restrictions on food items sold by light refreshment restaurants in 2023. These measures are welcomed by the trade. The FEHD will maintain close communication with the trade and roll out new measures in a timely manner to keep the licensing regime abreast of the times.

Maintenance and modernisation of lifts and escalators in public rental housing estates

In response to the recommendations made by the PAC, the Housing Department (HD) has reviewed the existing three-tier monitoring mechanism adopted for the maintenance of lifts and escalators (L/E) in Public Rental Housing estates and arranged different teams of staff to carry out lift surprise checks and half-yearly inspections in parallel, so as to minimise the frequency of suspension of lift services. In addition, in order to facilitate early identification of areas requiring attention or rectification in lift maintenance, the Housing Bureau and the Hong Kong Applied Science and Technology Research Institute signed a Memorandum of Understanding in November 2023 to jointly explore the application of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Predictive Maintenance System for lifts, which would leverage Internet of Things data to predict the lift breakdown patterns for carrying out preventive maintenance. ASTRI commenced the study of the said AI application in March 2024. The HD will work closely with ASTRI and assess the effectiveness of the AI system.

Apart from the monitoring of lift performance, the HD has stepped up efforts in monitoring maintenance records and reports prepared by the L/E contractors. The HD has provided clear guidelines on checking of the maintenance frequency of all main items against those stated in the maintenance schedule. With the HD's close monitoring, the contractors have submitted all the quarterly inspection reports duly signed by Registered L/E Engineers since the third quarter of 2023. Besides, the HD will enhance the existing information technology (IT) system to facilitate the monitoring of submission of quarterly inspection reports by the contractors.

The Lift Modernisation (LM) Programme calls for a complete replacement of the lift installation. The HD has reviewed the scope of LM works and will further discuss with the Lift and Escalator Contractors Association to review the LM project management, work procedures, affordability of the industry, etc with a view to expediting the implementation of LM works without compromising safety. The HD will also strive to shorten the shut down period of lifts by exploring other measures like partial LM and to require contractors to resume lift services within two weeks after obtaining the use permits.

Regarding the assessment of lifts aged 25 years or above for inclusion to the LM Programme, the HD has implemented an automated reminder system for project staff to conduct assessment and submit the evaluation reports in a timely manner. With a view to speeding up the workflow of the assessment exercise, the HD has digitalised the assessment form and recorded the lift evaluation in an IT system. Starting from the first quarter of 2024, staff can directly input the data and generate scores in the system. In addition, the HD has recorded all justifications clearly for determining the priority of lift replacement works under the LM Programme to better demonstrate that the decision of the relevant Technical Assessment Committee has proper basis.

With regard to other safety enhancement measures for L/E, the enhancement works for all prioritised lifts have been proceeded as scheduled. The HD will ensure that such works could be completed by 2031-32 as planned. The HD has also reviewed the project management of lift safety enhancement works and taken measures to shorten the shut down period of lifts. As for the overhaul of escalators, the HD had already revised its instructions in 2018 and all escalators, except newly handed-over escalators which are not yet required to undergo overhaul, have been overhauled in accordance with the HD's instructions.

President, I would like to thank the PAC again for its efforts and suggestions. The B/Ds concerned will strictly adhere to their responses and implement improvement measures as set out in the GM.

Thank you, President.