

LCQ10: "Document-free" passage

Following is a question by the Hon Lai Tung-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr Tang Ping-keung, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

The national Exit and Entry Administration announced on the 15th of last month the implementation of "document-free" channels on a trial basis at Shenzhen Bay Port and at Gongbei Port of Zhuhai Municipality for use by individuals travelling frequently to and from Hong Kong and Macao for private purposes. It is learnt that the above arrangement for easy passage is similar to contactless clearance arrangements such as the Flight Token service currently available at the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA), and the authorities have indicated on multiple previous occasions that since the contactless clearance technology requires direct comparison of faces against all data in the database, its application is more suitable for ports serving specific groups of pre-verified individuals below the population of 100 000. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether the authorities have plans to provide similar arrangements for easy passage at the corresponding port (i.e. Shenzhen Bay Port) and other land boundary control points; if so, of the details;
- (2) whether the authorities have conducted exchanges with the relevant authorities of the Mainland on the technology involved in the document-free channels and sought to understand (i) if the number of persons served by those channels has exceeded 100 000, and (ii) if there is any difference between the technology adopted by the Mainland for the document-free channels and that adopted in Hong Kong for contactless clearance; and
- (3) of the number of passengers who have used the Flight Token service to depart from the HKIA in each of the past two years, and the percentage they accounted for in the total number of departing passengers from the HKIA?

Reply:

President,

Starting from November 20, 2024, the Mainland has upgraded on a trial basis some of its e-channels at Shenzhen Bay Port of Shenzhen Municipality, Guangdong Province and Gongbei Port of Zhuhai Municipality, allowing individuals travelling frequently to and from Hong Kong and Macao for private purposes to use "document-free" channels. According to the notice issued by the Exit and Entry Administration of the People's Republic of China, Mainland residents holding a valid Exit-entry Permit for Travelling to and from Hong Kong and Macao and multiple exit endorsement for travelling to Hong Kong and Macao for stay, visiting relatives, business visit, talents or other

purposes, and Hong Kong and Macao residents (including non-Chinese citizens) holding a valid Mainland Travel Permit for Hong Kong and Macao Permanent Residents who are aged 14 or above and have agreed to the collection of facial features, fingerprints and other information by the border inspection authority may use the "document-free" channels at the border without presenting their physical travel document.

It is understood that upon arriving at the "document-free" channel, the passenger should look at the camera at the front gate, adjust his/her standing position as appropriate, and follow the instructions shown on the screen to verify his/her personal information. When the verification has been completed, the front gate will open and the passenger can enter the channel. Inside the channel, the passenger should follow the instructions to scan his/her biometric information such as fingerprints and facial features. Upon successful verification, the rear gate will open. The passenger may leave the channel and the clearance is completed.

In consultation with the Transport and Logistics Bureau, my reply to the question raised by the Hon Lai Tung-kuok is as follows:

(1) The Immigration Department (ImmD) has provided facilitation arrangements incorporating facial recognition technology at various land boundary control points (including Shenzhen Bay Port), including the self-service departure for visitors to Hong Kong Smart Departure launched in 2017 and Contactless e-Channel service launched in 2021. For Smart Departure, an eligible passenger needs to present his/her electronic travel document in front of the Smart Departure e-channel to read his/her personal data, and then show his/her face for identity verification after entering the channel. After confirmation, the departure clearance will be completed. As for Contactless e-Channel, a Hong Kong resident needs to present his/her identity card or QR code to read his/her personal data in front of the Contactless e-Channel, and then enter the channel for identity verification. During the process, he/she only needs to show his/her face without verifying his/her fingerprints, and there is no need to touch any shared equipment of the e-Channel. In addition, it also solves the issue of citizens being unable to use the e-Channel due to problems with their fingerprints in the past. This innovative clearance mode has provided faster, more convenient and hygienic immigration clearance service for Hong Kong residents. As of November 2024, more than 5 million Hong Kong residents have registered for Contactless e-Channel service, and the cumulative number of passengers who used the service since its launch has reached 130 million, accounting for more than 70 per cent of the number of Hong Kong residents who used the e-Channels for clearance every day, which proves that the service is widely welcomed by the public. Both of the above-mentioned immigration clearance arrangements require passengers to present their identity card or QR code to read their personal data, and then use facial recognition technology to verify their personal identity in order to complete the immigration clearance process.

(2) The ImmD has been maintaining close co-operation and exchanging views with the Mainland immigration authorities on immigration management and operations. The two above-mentioned immigration clearance arrangements by the

ImmD do not require the use of fingerprints for identity verification, which is different from the technology used in the "document-free" channel currently being trialled in the Mainland. The "document-free" channel mainly adopts facial recognition technology to replace the presentation of travel document or QR code to read passengers' personal data on the database, and passengers are required to confirm that the information read is correct before they can enter the channel. During the process of identity verification, passengers are still required to show their face and fingerprints to verify their identity. Therefore, the number of passengers served by the "document-free" channel can exceed 100 000.

As for Smart Departure and Contactless e-Channel, passengers' personal data is read directly from their identity card or QR code presented, and their identity is verified by using facial recognition technology. Therefore, the number of passengers served can also exceed 100 000.

Contactless clearance is a step further than Smart Departure and Contactless e-Channel services. It generally refers to the clearance process which does not require presentation of any travel document/QR code or the use of fingerprints for identity verification. It uses facial recognition to verify the user's identity against the database directly. The Flight Token service launched in 2022 is an example of applying relevant technology by the ImmD and the Airport Authority Hong Kong (AAHK). A passenger only needs to show his/her face for identity verification during the check-in procedure in order to store his/her personal data in the database for comparison purpose. For subsequent departure procedures at the airport (including baggage check-in, security inspection, immigration departure clearance, and boarding gate), he/she only needs to show his/her face for identity verification, and is not required to present any travel document or boarding pass again, which is convenient for passengers. In addition, an eligible Hong Kong resident can use the Flight Token e-Channel when departing from the airport. He/she only needs to scan his/her face at the Flight Token e-Channel camera to complete departure clearance without presenting any travel document/QR code or using his/her fingerprints for identity verification, thereby achieving contactless clearance.

Since this technology requires real-time comparison against all data in the database, to ensure high efficiency and accuracy, at this stage we consider that contactless clearance is technically more suitable for ports serving specific groups of pre-verified individuals below the population of 100 000.

In addition to the Flight Token e-Channel used at the airport, the contactless clearance technology will also be used at the Chung Ying Street checkpoint in Sha Tau Kok. People holding valid Closed Area Permits for entering and leaving Chung Ying Street (i.e. those people living or working at Chung Ying Street, etc.) can, upon registration, use the contactless channels to verify their identity through facial recognition technology in order to enter and leave the checkpoint unimpededly. We will also study with relevant Mainland authorities the application of contactless clearance technology in the Hetao Shenzhen-Hong Kong Science and Technology Innovation

Co-operation Zone in the future to allow designated personnel of the two parks to enjoy travel convenience.

(3) According to information provided by the AAHK, in 2023 and the first ten months of 2024, the number of users of the Flight Token service was approximately 6.9 million and 11.7 million respectively, accounting for 45 per cent and 70 per cent of the number of departing passengers at the airport in the same period.