

LCQ11: Impacts of Government's special work arrangement on construction industry

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (January 13):

Question:

To cope with the epidemic, the Government has implemented, for several occasions since early last year, a special work arrangement under which all government employees, save for those involved in the provision of emergency and essential public services, worked from home. Some members of the construction industry have relayed that such an arrangement has led to delays in the vetting and approval of a large number of works projects relating to land and housing developments. Consequently, the income and cash flow of contractors have been affected due to their failure to complete works projects by the contractual deadlines. The livelihood of their employees has also been affected by the suspension of works. On the other hand, some government employees have relayed that as they lack relevant information technology (IT) equipment at home and have not been issued with relevant procedural guidelines, it is difficult for them to handle the vetting and approval work at home. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the criteria to be met by public services in order for them to be regarded as emergency or essential services; whether such criteria include: suspension of such services will (i) adversely affect the land and housing supply, (ii) seriously affect the operation of relevant industries, and (iii) deal a severe blow to the livelihood of the practitioners concerned;

(2) whether it will, in the light of the aforesaid situation, improve the special work arrangement, so as to avoid delays in or suspension of the relevant vetting and approval work;

(3) whether it has provided government employees who need to handle vetting and approval work at home with computers for processing documents and architectural/engineering drawings, as well as IT software and hardware for holding video conferences, etc.;

(4) whether it has formulated vetting and approval procedure and guidelines which are applicable to the special work arrangement, including (i) allowing applicants to make electronic submission of documents and architectural/engineering drawings for various kinds of applications, (ii) allowing the use of recorded footage or real-time images in place of onsite inspections, and (iii) adjusting the counting methods for relevant

statutory deadlines and performance pledges; and

(5) whether it has consulted members of the construction industry on the vetting and approval procedure under the special work arrangement, in order to make appropriate arrangements and reduce the relevant impacts?

Reply:

President,

In view of the pandemic, the Planning Department (PlanD), the Lands Department (LandsD) and the Buildings Department (BD) under the Development Bureau, which are responsible for approving development projects, as with other departments, have implemented special work arrangements for employees to fight the pandemic collectively. A reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) and (2) Implementing special work arrangements for employees includes allowing employees to work from home as far as practicable, so as to minimise their need for commuting. But if the maintenance of emergency and essential public services requires the presence of an employee in the office or an outdoor location (such as carrying out inspections for matters relating to public safety, providing counter services, receiving and issuing documents, etc.), the department concerned has a responsibility to deploy staff to discharge such duties, as well as arrange their work schedules and provide support as appropriate. Meanwhile, departments will carry on with duties that can be performed at home as far as practicable (regardless of whether they are emergent and essential), so as to ensure the work related to land and housing supply will not be severely affected.

(3) The PlanD, LandsD and BD have all stepped up efforts in equipping their employees with appropriate information technology provisions, including laptops, webmail services and video-conferencing softwares, etc. The three departments will continue to provide information technology equipment to relevant officers as appropriate, so as to meet their needs when working from home.

(4) The aforementioned departments have adjusted their work arrangements based on past experience as far as practicable, so as to minimise the impact of working from home.

For the PlanD, since the phased introduction of video-conferencing arrangements from May 2020 onwards, the Town Planning Board (TPB) has managed to hold all its meeting as scheduled despite the subsequent implementation of special work arrangements for employees by the government for several times. Even with the special work arrangements, the TPB is committed to completing work such as plan making and processing of planning applications in accordance with the statutory timeframe under the Town Planning Ordinance without causing delays to development and works projects. Members of the public can put their planning applications and related documents into the drop-in box at the TPB Secretariat's reception counter on 15/F, North Point Government Offices during office hours, or submit them electronically. They

can also make enquiries through the telephone hotline or email, as well as visit the TPB's website for information on statutory planning. The TPB will also announce the latest arrangements of its public services on its website. Moreover, the PlanD is reviewing the existing channel for electronic submission of planning applications, and will roll out the relevant enhancement measures within this year with a view to further facilitating submission of applications.

As for the LandsD, it has been handling land administration work relating to land and housing supply, including processing various land transaction applications, land disposal, and various submissions and applications under lease, as usual under the special work arrangements. During the process, LandsD officers will have deliberations through video-conferences instead of face-to-face meetings if necessary. Most of the department's services accept submission of applications and documents through electronic means by members of the public and the industry. For the convenience of the public and having regard to the fact that certain documents must be submitted in their original form or in certified copy due to statutory requirements or operational need, the LandsD has been maintaining a certain extent of counter service for receiving documents from the public and the industry. Moreover, telephone enquiry hotlines and online services remain in operation. Members of the public may continue to utilise the services provided by the LandsD through the aforementioned means.

The BD has similarly strived to provide emergency and essential public services to the public under the pandemic. These services mainly include handling public reports on building safety and unauthorised building works in progress, critical statutory submissions for new development projects, applications for registration of building professionals and contractors, etc. In order to minimise the possible impact on development and works projects arising from the implementation of special work arrangements, the BD has implemented a series of specific measures to facilitate the processing of statutory submissions, including priority processing of more critical statutory submissions of new development projects, such as the first submission of general building plans, foundation plans, excavation and lateral support plans and pile cap plans, and the amendment plans required for re-application of occupation permits or related to site works in progress, etc. If necessary, the BD may also accord priority to individual cases. In addition, the department has applied information technology and adopted streamlined and pragmatic approaches to process submissions. For example, depending on circumstances, plans may be approved first if only minor deficiencies are noted. The conditions will be listed in the approval letter such that the applicant can follow up in the subsequent amendment submission together with the application for consent to the commencement of the building works concerned. The BD will process these submissions concurrently for facilitating the industry.

(5) The relevant departments have issued press releases on their service arrangements during the implementation of the special work arrangements as appropriate. They have also uploaded such press releases to their websites to inform the public and the industries of the relevant details, and will

continue to maintain close liaison with the relevant professional institutions and stakeholder organisations on the arrangements on a need basis.