

LCQ19: Management of public swimming pools and beaches

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui, in the Legislative Council today (August 25):

Question:

Regarding the management of the public swimming pools and beaches under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of courses and places on scuba diving rescue provided in each of the past five years by the LCSD for civil service lifeguards; the measures in place to encourage more civil service lifeguards to take such courses;

(2) given that trained and qualified lifeguards may, with the permission of the officers-in-charge of public beaches and under the supervision of senior lifeguards, carry out emergency underwater search for drowning victims using scuba diving equipment,

(i) of the current number of lifeguards stationing at public beaches who may use such equipment (together with a tabulated breakdown by name of beach),

(ii) of the measures in place to ensure that there are such lifeguards on duty at public beaches whenever they are open, and

(iii) whether the officers-in-charge of public beaches are required to have been trained on using scuba diving equipment or possess relevant professional qualifications and experience; if not, how the LCSD ensures that the officers-in-charge of the beaches possess the ability to make professional judgments when deciding whether or not to permit a lifeguard to use scuba diving equipment;

(3) of the current number of public beaches at which lifeguard services are not provided, and the reasons for that;

(4) whether the positions of civil service lifeguard and non-civil service contract lifeguard have the same entry requirements; if not, of the reasons for that, and how the LCSD ensures consistency in the quality of services provided by these two types of staff;

(5) of the number and percentage of seasonal lifeguards who departed in each of the past six months; and

(6) given that the LCSD has lowered the ceiling for the attendances at public swimming pools so as to reduce the risk of epidemic spreading, but currently

it still leases out swimming lanes to swimming clubs for offering training courses on swimming, leading to a further reduction in the opportunity for members of the public to use swimming pools, whether the LCSD will instead lease out to swimming clubs those swimming pools that have to be temporarily closed due to manpower shortage of lifeguards; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply

President,

My reply to the questions raised by the Hon Elizabeth Quat is as follows:

(1) All civil service lifeguards employed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) shall possess relevant and valid lifeguard awards issued by the Hong Kong Life Saving Society (HKLSS) as well as recognised and valid first aid certificates. The LCSD, however, does not require lifeguards to possess any qualification on scuba diving mandatorily.

To enhance the knowledge and skills of lifeguards, the LCSD has been providing course on rescue skills with scuba diving to serving civil service lifeguards. The course aims at providing scuba diving skills as well as training on underwater search and rescue using scuba diving equipment. It also covers knowledge in marine environment, the relevant safety rules and contingency measures, etc. A total of five courses were provided in the past five years. The actual number of training places depends on the number of applicants for the courses. Civil service lifeguards posted to beaches and water sports centres have priority in enrolment. The LCSD will review the situation regularly to meet the needs.

(2) Scuba diving equipment at the LCSD beaches are only provided for use by senior lifeguards or lifeguards who have completed and passed the courses on rescue skills with scuba diving provided by the Training Section of the LCSD. Currently, there are a total of 140 lifeguards qualified for using scuba diving equipment at the LCSD beaches.

Lifeguards are posted to work at different swimming pools or beaches in response to operational needs. Hence, the number of lifeguards qualified for using scuba diving equipment at the beaches varies from time to time. Scuba diving is not a major responsibility of lifeguards and therefore, the LCSD will not arrange lifeguards qualified for using scuba diving equipment to each and every beach.

As the officers-in-charge of the beaches are mainly responsible for supervising venue staff and leading the lifeguard team in rescue operations as and where necessary. As for senior lifeguards, they command the entire rescue operations and confirm that there are at least two qualified on-duty lifeguards at the venue before using scuba diving equipment. Generally speaking, lifeguards will apply skills taught and assessed in the training associated with the lifeguard qualifications, including underwater rescue by

skin diving. When there are at least two on-duty lifeguards qualified for using scuba diving equipment at the venue, the officers-in-charge of the beach may, on a need basis, task them to do the underwater rescue by using scuba diving equipment before divers of the Fire Services Department arrive and take charge.

(3) At present, among the 42 existing gazetted beaches, three of them (namely Harpin Beach, Rocky Bay Beach and Gemini Beach) are not open for swimming as they are not provided with beach facilities such as beach building and shark prevention net. Normal lifeguard services are provided at 18 beaches whereas such services are suspended at the remaining ones. The public are advised not to swim at those beaches without lifeguard services provided.

Enormous challenge was faced by the LCSD in the recruitment of seasonal lifeguards this year. Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, public swimming pools and gazetted beaches under the LCSD were closed between December 2020 and March 2021. Due to the full closure, selection interviews and trade tests for seasonal lifeguards in 2021 originally scheduled during this period were not conducted as planned, which gravely affected the progress of the recruitment exercises. In addition, people who aspired for a career in lifesaving were unable to undergo lifesaving training and related assessments conducted by the LCSD, HKLSS and its affiliated clubs due to the suspension of these activities under the pandemic. The suspension also affected the revalidation training and assessments conducted every three years for qualified lifeguards with valid lifeguard certificates, resulting in a substantial reduction in the overall supply of lifeguards.

The mobility of seasonal lifeguards is higher as compared to their civil service counterparts in view of its short-term nature. The ever-increasing demand for lifeguards resulting from the growing number of private swimming pools in Hong Kong in recent years, coupled with the fact that beaches and water sports centres under the LCSD in general are located in remote areas which call for longer commuting time and higher transport fare, bring keen competition for seasonal lifeguards between the LCSD and the private sector. On top of that, a large number of job opportunities will be available for lifeguards when the Water World Ocean Park opens this year, posing an even tighter manpower supply of seasonal lifeguards. The willingness of job seekers to apply for the post of seasonal lifeguard is thus indirectly affected.

(4) The qualifications possessed by civil service lifeguards and seasonal lifeguards employed by the LCSD are largely the same. Both possess valid Pool Lifeguard Award and/or Beach Lifeguard Award as well as professional lifesaving qualifications to ensure service quality.

(5) A total of 335 seasonal lifeguards have been employed by the LCSD in 2021. As at August 1, 2021, among them, 44 resigned before completion of contract. A majority of them have transferred to the posts of civil service lifeguard or non-civil service contract full-year full-time lifeguards of the LCSD.

(6) The number of swimmers during the opening hours of the swimming pools is generally higher, making the operation and management arrangements of such period more complicated than the sessional breaks. To meet the pressing demand of swimming organisations for swimming lanes, the LCSD opens up the two sessional breaks of swimming pool every day for hiring by swimming organisations for training purposes. During this period, one supervisor (i.e. an Amenities Assistant or a senior lifeguard) and two lifeguards will be especially arranged to assist in handling emergencies at swimming pool complexes. In addition, all hirers are required to employ coaches or instructors with valid lifesaving qualifications to oversee the safety and discipline of swimming learners during the period.

If organisations are allowed to hire swimming pool facilities which are temporarily closed during the opening hours without sufficient lifeguards to oversee their use (including whether leisure swimmers have intruded into facilities open only for hirers), the safety of swimmers may be jeopardised. Taking into account the above, the LCSD considers it inappropriate to relax the arrangement for the time being.