

LCQ2: Supporting cross-boundary passenger service sector

Following is a question by the Hon Frankie Yick and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

Since February last year, the Government has closed most of the boundary control points one after another to cope with the epidemic, resulting in the number of cross-boundary travellers plunging and cross-boundary passenger service business coming to a standstill. Some cross-boundary passenger service operators (operators) have pointed out that while the Government did provide operators with a one-off subsidy based on the number of conveyances under the first-round relief measures, the subsidy was just a drop in the bucket. As the various operators had to meet overheads despite having zero income during the past year, they have used up their reserves and have no way to borrow money, and are at the end of their tether. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that even though the various boundary control points will hopefully reopen following the launch of relevant vaccination programmes, the various operators are now on the brink of closing down as the Government is watching with folded arms, what measures the Government has put in place to ensure that when the various boundary control points reopen, the cross-boundary passenger services provided by operators which have not yet closed down will be adequate to meet the demand;

(2) given that conveyances which have been left idle in the open air for a long time need to have quite a number of their parts repaired or replaced before they can travel safely again, whether the Government will consider providing operators with a "business resumption allowance" to facilitate their preparation for resuming operation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will consider including cross-boundary passenger service practitioners as a priority group for administration of the vaccines for Coronavirus Disease 2019, so as to reduce their risk and cross-boundary travellers' risk of contracting the disease, thereby enhancing the protection for the cross-boundary passenger service sector?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the Hon Frankie Yick's question is as follows:

Cross-boundary land-based and ferry passenger services, being key components of the transport and traffic network, are conducive to promoting

the connectivity between Hong Kong and the Mainland and Macao, as well as facilitating the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. The Government has been closely monitoring the operation and provision of cross-boundary passenger services to ensure that the services provided by operators can meet the demands of the community, which include:

(i) Guangdong/Hong Kong and Hong Kong/Macao cross-boundary coach (CBC) services providing point-to-point connection between Hong Kong and the Mainland as well as Macao;

(ii) cross-boundary hire cars providing higher-end and more personalised cross-boundary point-to-point transport services; and

(iii) cross-boundary ferries plying between Hong Kong and Macao as well as a number of the Mainland cities.

In response to the development of COVID-19, the governments of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao have been taking appropriate measures under the co-operation mechanism on joint prevention and control of the epidemic. Impacted by the anti-epidemic measures, only limited cross-boundary land-based services have been provided since February 2020, while cross-boundary ferry services have been completely halted. We understand that the ongoing epidemic is seriously affecting the livelihood of the cross-boundary passenger transport trade and its employees. In this regard, the Government has provided subsidies under the Anti-epidemic Fund and rolled out a number of measures to ease the difficulty on the trade and its employees, which include:

(i) each CBC and each cross-boundary hire car is provided with non-accountable subsidies totalling \$65,000 and \$55,000 respectively;

(ii) each local CBC driver is provided with subsidies totalling \$23,400;

(iii) land-based cross-boundary passenger transport operators are provided with rent waiver for facilities such as ticket offices, regulator kiosks and passenger waiting halls in government premises until March 31, 2021;

(iv) parking spaces within the Shenzhen Bay Port have been arranged for the trade to park their CBCs for free;

(v) waivers of Closed Road Permit fees for CBCs and cross-boundary hire cars, vehicle licence and examination fees for commercial vehicles, as well as the fees payable for issue or renewal of Passenger Service Licence and Passenger Service Licence Certificate for CBCs are provided until December 29, 2021;

(vi) each eligible cross-boundary ferry vessel is provided with non-accountable subsidies totalling \$1,500,000; and

(vii) the Employment Support Scheme, which provides subsidies to eligible employers for paying wages of their employees for six months, helps alleviate the financial burden of eligible employers in the cross-boundary passenger transport trade and retain their employees.

Since the epidemic situation is still very severe at present, the normal operation of cross-boundary passenger services cannot be resumed. We have been maintaining close communication with the cross-boundary passenger transport trade and fully understand the trade's wish to resume its operation as soon as possible. In this regard, the governments of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao have been maintaining liaison so that once the epidemic situation is under control, the cross-boundary people flow amongst the three places can be enabled as soon as possible and the cross-boundary passenger transport service trade can also resume its operation. We are glad to learn that while enduring the challenging times at present, the cross-boundary passenger transport operators have been fully prepared to ensure that they can promptly resume operation to provide appropriate cross-boundary passenger services for meeting public demand when normal operation of passenger clearance services resumes.

The Government fully understands the predicament faced by the cross-boundary passenger transport trade at present, and has taken note of the trade's views on further support measures. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and enhance communication and co-operation with the relevant authorities in the Mainland and Macao. We aim to resume cross-boundary passenger transport once the epidemic situation is under control. We will proactively formulate measures pertinent to the trade and render necessary assistance, with a view to ensuring the smooth operation of cross-boundary passenger services.

We have also taken note of the trade's suggestion that cross-boundary passenger service employees should be included as a priority group for COVID-19 vaccination, which will be taken into account by the Government when formulating vaccination policies. The Government's goal is to provide vaccines free of charge for the majority of Hong Kong residents within 2021 through a vaccination programme led by the Government. Having regard to various factors including the views of experts, the supply of vaccines, etc, the Government will consider according priority to the target groups of healthcare workers, staff of residential care homes and the elderly, etc, as well as related persons for people's livelihood and daily necessities such as cross-boundary drivers.