

LCQ21: Provision of interpretation services for the ethnic minorities

Following is a question by the Hon Kwong Chun-yu and a written reply by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Erick Tsang Kwok-wai, in the Legislative Council today (June 17):

Question:

At present, government departments and public organizations providing public services (public service providers) will provide interpretation services for the ethnic minorities (EMs) who understand neither Chinese nor English to facilitate their access to public services. The Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents (CHEER) operated by the Hong Kong Christian Service is one of the interpretation service providers. Some EMs have relayed that the frontline staff of quite a number of public service providers did not take the initiative to arrange interpretation services for them even though the staff members could not communicate with them effectively. On the other hand, the Government has amended the Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality (the Guidelines) to incorporate into the Guidelines the guidance notes on language services and data collection on service users. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of occasions in each of the past three years on which the various public service providers (including the Social Welfare Department, the Housing Department, the Department of Health, the Labour Department and other government departments as well as the Hospital Authority) arranged interpretation services, with a breakdown by (i) name of public service provider, (ii) type of interpretation service (i.e. telephone interpretation, on-sight interpretation, on-site interpretation, written translation, proofreading and simultaneous interpretation), and (iii) the EM language involved in the interpretation service;

(2) whether it knows the number of requests received by CHEER in each of the past three years for the provision of interpretation services to EMs using public services, with a breakdown by (i) name of public service provider, (ii) type of interpretation service, (iii) the EM language involved in the interpretation service, and (iv) whether the request was acceded to;

(3) given that the Government will collect, in accordance with the Guidelines, the relevant data on the use of various types of public services by EMs (including ethnicities and EM languages), whether the Government will, based on such data, plan for the future allocation of resources for supporting fair access to public services by EMs;

(4) whether the Government will monitor if the various public service providers have provided interpretation services for EMs in accordance with

the guidance notes on provision of language services in the Guidelines; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) whether the Home Affairs Department and the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau will formulate guidelines to require CHEER and the various public service providers to record and publish the reasons for declining requests for interpretation services, so as to enhance transparency and enable monitoring by the public; and

(6) given that quite a number of government departments (e.g. the Housing Department and the Labour Department) have not formulated any booking arrangement for interpretation services, and hence EMs who need on-site interpretation services to help them fill out application forms for public services have to visit the offices of these departments to obtain a tag and wait for their turn to be interviewed before interpretation services will be arranged for them, and such process is very time-consuming, whether the Government will urge the various public service providers to formulate booking arrangements for on-site interpretation services?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government is committed to eliminating racial discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for people of diverse race. To strengthen support for people of diverse race, the Government has refined the Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality (the Guidelines). With effect from April this year, the scope of application of the Guidelines has been extended from 23 government bureaux/departments (B/Ds) and public organisations (Note 1) to all B/Ds as well as related organisations (collectively referred to as public authorities) providing services to people of diverse race. The purpose of the Guidelines is to raise public authorities' awareness on the need for racial diversity and inclusion as well as equity considerations in the formulation, implementation and review of relevant policies and measures. The Guidelines also provide guidance to public authorities to ensure that people of Hong Kong, regardless of their race, enjoy equal access to public services.

In Hong Kong, people of diverse race who cannot communicate effectively in English and Chinese may encounter difficulties in accessing public services. To bridge the language barrier, the revised Guidelines contain a new guidance note on provision of language services. Concrete steps have been set out to facilitate the management and front-line staff of public authorities to identify the language service needs of service users, introduce the availability of and proactively offer language services, and arrange language services to those in need as appropriate.

The revised Guidelines also contain a new guidance note on data collection which stipulates the requirements for public authorities to review all policy areas, identify policies and measures that people of diverse race may make use of and need access to, and collect data on a regular basis for

the purposes of service monitoring and continuous improvement of service provision. The data collection arrangement will be implemented by phases with a view to completing the identification of services and necessary preparations for full implementation by public authorities by March 2022.

After consulting the relevant responsible B/Ds, the consolidated reply to the questions raised by Hon Kwong Chun-yu is as follows:

(1) The revised Guidelines are applicable to all B/Ds and related organisations with effect from April this year. Since the collection of data relating to interpretation services is being implemented gradually, only information pertaining to B/Ds and public organisations covered by the previous version of the Guidelines can be provided at this stage. The number of interpretation services arranged by the public organisations concerned for people of diverse race in the past three financial years is shown in Annex 1.

(2) The Home Affairs Department (HAD) provides support services for people of diverse race to help them integrate into the community. Major services include the provision of language learning classes and integration programmes through six support service centres for ethnic minorities and two sub-centres. One of these centres, namely the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents (CHEER Centre) operated by the Hong Kong Christian Service, also provides general interpretation and translation services in eight languages (Note 2) for non-specialised/non-professional areas. B/Ds, public organisations and people of diverse race are welcome to make use of these services. Interpretation services include mainly instant telephone interpretation services. Subject to the availability of resources, on-site or simultaneous interpretation services can also be arranged.

The interpretation and translation services provided by the CHEER Centre with breakdowns by B/Ds, public organisations and people of diverse race as well as by languages in the past three years are shown in Annexes 2 and 3 respectively. The CHEER Centre does not keep statistics on cases where interpretation services cannot be provided.

(3) In accordance with the Guidelines, public authorities can base on the information regularly collected to assess the impact of their policies and measures on racial equality. This would in turn enable public authorities, having regard to their actual operational circumstances, to consider refining their respective policies, measures and services so as to achieve the objective of enabling people of diverse race enjoy equal access to public services and for continuous improvement of service provision.

(4) To avoid language becoming an obstacle for service users to access public services, it is stipulated in the Guidelines that public authorities should oversee and regularly review the arrangements of language services provision, and make refinement to the arrangements as appropriate. Moreover, public authorities are required to report on "the need for language services" (including the number of requests received and the number of interpretation services provided) and "preferred language" to the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (CMAB) annually to facilitate overall monitoring. If

a member of the public consider that the public authorities are in breach of the Guidelines, he/she can put up the case under the existing complaint handling mechanism of the public authorities concerned.

(5) In accordance with the Guidelines, public authorities should collect basic information on "the need for interpretation/translation services" and "preferred language" (other than Chinese and English) of service users who need interpretation/translation services. Such information includes the number of cases where language services are requested; the number of cases where language services are offered to service users; the number of cases where offer of language services is accepted or declined; and the language requested, etc. Public authorities will provide the above information to the CMAB annually. The aggregate statistics will be published on the CMAB's website for public information.

(6) Public authorities will provide suitable assistance to service users of diverse race according to such users' actual needs, including interpretation services, thereby ensuring their equal access to public services. Since the interpretation needs of people of diverse race vary depending on what public services they are accessing to, public authorities will consider the actual situation and adopt appropriate arrangements to provide interpretation services to them.

For instance, members of the public requiring interpretation services when visiting Hong Kong Housing Authority's offices (such as estate offices and office of public rental housing application) may make advance appointment with the CHEER Centre for interpretation services. They can also make request to the duty officers on the spot who will contact the CHEER Centre for arranging interpretation services through telephone or other means instantly, or make appointment for such service. Moreover, the Labour Department (LD) arranges interpretation services for people of diverse race to ensure that their access to services will not be hampered owing to language barriers. When people who speak neither Chinese nor English come to the LD with immediate need of service, the LD would contact the CHEER Centre as soon as possible to provide interpretation services over the phone. As for prior appointments and scheduled interviews, the LD would arrange on-site interpretation service as far as practicable.

Note 1: The 23 B/Ds and public organisations are the Education Bureau, Social Welfare Department, Labour Department, Home Affairs Department, Employees Retraining Board, Vocational Training Council, Food and Health Bureau, Department of Health, Hospital Authority, Construction Industry Council, Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, Innovation and Technology Commission, Office of the Communications Authority, Housing Department, Hong Kong Observatory, Hongkong Post, Legal Aid Department, Hong Kong Police Force, Correctional Services Department, Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, Immigration Department, Hong Kong Fire Services Department and Registration and Electoral Office.

Note 2: The eight languages are Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu and Vietnamese.