

LCQ7: Certificates issued by Marine Department

Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (October 27):

Question:

In the light of the operational needs on the Mainland and in Hong Kong of mobile fishing vessels, the Marine Department (MD) currently issues local certificates of competency of coxswains or engine operators (CoCs) with restrictions to holders of Mainland Fishing Vessel Personnel Certificates (Mainland Certificates). CoCs will expire on the expiry dates of Mainland Certificates (i.e. when the holders reach the age of 65). Such an arrangement has resulted in quite a number of vessel personnel who are still physically fit losing their jobs upon reaching the age of 65, as well as a shortage in the manpower of coxswains and engine operators. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective numbers of persons (i) who held CoCs and (ii) whose CoCs expired due to the aforesaid reason, in each of the past five years, together with a breakdown by whether they were coxswains or engine operators;
- (2) as the MD indicated in 2019 that on the premise of ensuring that the personnel operating a local vessel possess suitable safety knowledge, the MD would be open-minded in exploring ways to assist holders of Mainland Certificates in meeting the required standards, so that they could obtain CoCs, of the progress and outcome of the exploratory work;
- (3) given that at present, when vessel personnel who have been issued with CoCs not by virtue of holding Mainland Certificates reach the age of 65, the validity period of their CoCs may be granted an extension provided that they are physically fit and pass the eyesight test, whether the Government will extend this arrangement to vessel personnel who have been issued with CoCs by virtue of holding Mainland Certificates; and
- (4) of the new measures in place to alleviate the problem of shortage in the manpower of coxswains and engine operators?

Reply:

President,

In response to the Hon Steven Ho's question, in consultation with the Marine Department (MD), our reply is as follows:

- (1) The statistics on holders of a valid local certificate of competency (CoC) and holders of a CoC and a Mainland Fishing Vessel Personnel Certificate (Mainland Certificate) which ceased to have effect simultaneously

upon the day on which the holders attain the age of 65 in the past five years, with breakdown by coxswains and engine operators, are set out below:

| Year | (i) Numbers of holders of a valid CoC | | (ii) Numbers of holders of a CoC and Mainland Certificate which ceased to have effect simultaneously upon the day on which the holders attain the age of 65 | |
|------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| | Coxswain | Engine operator | Coxswain | Engine operator |
| 2016 | 3 116 | 1 467 | 143 | 51 |
| 2017 | 3 025 | 1 445 | 137 | 51 |
| 2018 | 2 942 | 1 419 | 160 | 72 |
| 2019 | 2 894 | 1 385 | 203 | 105 |
| 2020 | 2 801 | 1 335 | 149 | 86 |

(2) Having considered the operating needs of mobile fishing vessels plying between the Mainland and Hong Kong, the MD issues local CoCs to local persons in possession of Mainland Certificates without examination. As the technical knowledge covered by the Mainland Certificates differs from the requirements of the local examinations, a specific condition is attached to local CoCs issued to such persons specifying that the local CoCs issued are only valid during the validity period of the Mainland Certificates. For those CoC holders who would like to continue to hold a valid local CoC after their Mainland Certificates have expired, they must be subject to assessment to ensure that they possess the experience and knowledge to obtain the local CoC of the same grade. The MD is reviewing the differences between the certificate requirements of the two places with a view to devising a suitable assessment regime. It is expected that the industry will be consulted on the preliminary proposal in early 2022.

(3) The proposal for industry consultation mentioned in (2) above will also consider the extension arrangement of relevant CoCs.

(4) The government has been in communication with the maritime industry to explore suitable measures to increase the manpower supply for the trade, and to nurture a proficient specialised workforce for the industry through the Maritime and Aviation Training Fund (MATF). Local Vessel Trade Training Incentive Scheme and Ship Repair Training Incentive Scheme have been set up specifically for the local vessel trade under the MATF upon the establishment of the MATF in 2014. By providing financial incentives, the two schemes encourage new recruits employed by the local vessel trade to develop long-term career in the industry. Furthermore, to provide greater degree of flexibility to local seafarers, recipients of the Local Vessel Trade Training Incentive Scheme are allowed to change companies during the subsidy period, as long as they are still performing seaman duties in local companies.

Recent measures deployed under the MATF for increasing the manpower of

coxswains and engine operators include:

1. With a view to increasing the crew number for operating larger local vessels, Local Vessel Competency Enhancement Scheme was set up at the end of 2019. It offers financial incentives to those who have successfully obtained the Local Coxswain / Engine Operator Grade 2 Certificates. Over 200 practitioners in the local vessel trade have so far benefited from the scheme;
2. From this September, the eligibility for application of Professional Training and Examination Refund Scheme has been extended to cover practitioners-to-be so that those who need to acquire relevant knowledge through training to join the maritime industry would also benefit. This enhancement measure helps the maritime industry attract new blood and reduce attrition rate; and
3. The newly established Maritime Training Support Scheme assists the Hong Kong Sea School to implement a new school-based Maritime Studies curriculum commencing from the 2021/22 school year, so that students can acquire maritime knowledge, practical on-board skills and actual shipboard experience, as well as the eligibility to sit for the Coxswain Grade 3 Certificate Examination through a well-mixed of theory and practical training programme. Training the Hong Kong Sea School students to become local coxswains, the scheme will hopefully provide a steady and sustainable supply of competent new blood to the local vessel trade so as to alleviate the deficiency and ageing problems of the industry.

In addition, the Government has implemented the following measures to mitigate the manpower shortage problem of the local shipping industry, including:

1. To allow retired civil servants who are qualified to operate government vessels to directly apply for the respective CoCs for Local Coxswains or CoCs for Local Engine Operators for commercial vessels without undergoing a test;
2. To allow a holder of Coxswain Grade 2 Certificate (CoC 2) or Local CoC as Master (60 tons and under) to operate large local vessels subject to meeting specified conditions. Such applicants are required to complete shipboard training recognised by the MD, pass a practical assessment, serve specified type of vessels and specified route, and take up employment with specified company;
3. The MD has launched another facilitation measure since October 2019 under which holders of a local CoC which has expired for no more than 36 months may apply for issuance of a local CoC with the same grade as that of the expired local CoC without examination subject to specific conditions are met to reduce the loss of local experienced seafarers;
4. The MD has flexibly adjusted the examination regime so that those who aspire to pursue a career in the local vessel trade can first pass the coxswain or engine operator examinations, complete the qualifying sea service period and the required on-job training before a CoC is issued to them; and

5. The MD implemented the accreditation of the eight local CoCs corresponding to the respective qualification framework levels (QF Levels) under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework on November 16, 2020. The eight local CoCs, which correspond respectively to QF Levels 2 and 3, can help confirm that the CoC holders possess certain abilities related to the designated professions, enhance the public recognition of CoCs in the society and reinforce public confidence in the operators. In addition, the accreditation at QF Levels can provide progression opportunities for local seafarers in study and work, so as to attract more people to join the local vessel trade.

We will continue to review the implementation and effectiveness of the existing schemes and actively explore other feasible measures to help more effectively respond to the manpower requirements of the local vessel trade for coxswains and engine operators.