

LCQ7: Support measures for cross-boundary passenger service sector

Following is a question by the Hon Lau Kwok-fan and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (January 27):

Question:

To cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Government has closed a number of land boundary control points one after another since February last year. As a result, the services of most cross-boundary passenger coaches travelling to and from the Mainland have been suspended, causing a drastic reduction in the income of the cross-boundary passenger service sector, and most drivers have been idle for almost a year. However, the various rounds of relief measures rolled out by the Government under the Anti-epidemic Fund have not included any support measures specifically formulated for the cross-boundary passenger service sector. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has grasped the extent to which the incomes of the operators and practitioners of cross-boundary passenger coach services have been affected by the epidemic, including the number of practitioners who have been idle for over 10 months;
- (2) whether it will expeditiously put forth gap-filling measures in support of the cross-boundary passenger service sector, such as providing a one-off living subsidy for eligible practitioners; if so, of the financial commitment and the expected number of beneficiaries; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) whether it has explored measures to assist the cross-boundary passenger service sector in generating income amid the epidemic, such as hiring cross-boundary passenger coaches to take inbound travellers from the various boundary control points to the designated hotels for quarantine; and
- (4) whether it will review the existing mechanism for formulating relief measures, so as to ensure that it will not leave out any industries which have been affected by the epidemic and are in real and urgent need of support?

Reply:

President,

Our consolidated reply to the Hon Lau Kwok-fan's question is as follows:

There are about 1 500 cross-boundary coaches (CBCs) (including port shuttle buses) with over 1 000 Hong Kong drivers in the CBC passenger service

trade. We understand that the ongoing epidemic is seriously affecting the livelihood of these operators and drivers. In this regard, the Government has launched various measures under the first to third rounds of the Anti-epidemic Fund to ease the pressure on the trade and its employees, which include providing a total of \$65,000 non-accountable subsidy for each CBC and a total of \$16,700 subsidy for each local CBC driver. Furthermore, the Employment Support Scheme launched by the Government, which provided subsidies to eligible employers for paying wages of their employees for six months, should have helped alleviate the financial burden of eligible employers in the cross-boundary passenger transport trade and retain their employees. These operators are also provided with rent waiver for facilities such as ticket offices, regulator kiosks and passenger waiting halls in government premises until March 31, 2021. Besides, a piece of land within the Shenzhen Bay Port, which can accommodate about 130 CBCs, has been arranged for exclusive use by the trade as temporary parking spaces of idle CBCs for free. In addition to the above measures, the 2020 Policy Address has announced that the Government would roll out additional relief measures amounting to nearly \$600 million for the tourism industry. The beneficiaries would include drivers of CBCs which mainly serve tourists.

The Government understands the wish of the trade to resume the operation of CBCs as soon as possible. However, considering that passenger clearance services are provided only at the two land-based boundary control points (BCPs) at Shenzhen Bay Port and Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port for the time being and the cross-boundary passenger flow remains low, coupled with the fact that currently there is sufficient supply of connecting local transport services at the two BCPs, we have reservation on the operating effectiveness of providing the relevant services by CBCs.

The Government understands the predicament faced by the trade at present, and has taken note of the trade's views on further support measures. The Government will continue to study and formulate policies and initiatives pertinent to the cross-boundary passenger transport services and proactively render necessary assistance to the trade, which includes facilitating the resumption of operation of CBC services as early as practicable when governments of Guangdong and Hong Kong gradually resume passenger clearance services at land-based BCPs. The Anti-epidemic Fund Steering Committee will, having regard to the development of the epidemic, views from various industry stakeholders and their actual business situation, continue to optimise the remaining balance of the Anti-epidemic Fund based on the proposals put forth by the relevant bureaux/departments to provide support and assistance.