

LCQ20: Supporting the public light bus trade

Following is a question by the Hon Lee Chun-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Mr Lam Sai-hung, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

There are views that the public light bus (PLB) trade is currently facing various problems, including ageing drivers, overlapping of routes with railway services, as well as operating difficulties of overnight routes. It has been reported that a number of PLB owners (in particular those of red minibuses (RMBs) operating non-scheduled services) with loans secured by their PLB licences have recently indicated that they were requested to make early repayments by banks, and some banks even informed certain PLB owners who failed to make early repayments that their PLBs put up as collaterals would be seized. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the respective numbers of applications made by operators of RMBs and green minibuses (GMBs) operating scheduled services for the Pre-approved Principal Payment Holiday Scheme (the Scheme) launched by the Hong Kong Monetary Authority together with the Banking Sector SME Lending Co-ordination Mechanism;

(2) given that an orderly exit from the Scheme has commenced upon its expiry at the end of July last year, whether it knows the respective numbers of cases involving RMB and GMB operators having defaulted on loan repayments under the Scheme at present, as well as the respective amounts of loans involved; and

(3) whether the authorities have plans to provide support for the RMB trade, so as to enable it to tide over the difficulties arising from economic downturn; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA), our reply to the question raised by the Hon Lee Chun-keung is as follows:

(1) and (2) In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the HKMA proactively co-ordinates with the banking sector and implemented a series of support measures, including the launch of the Pre-approved Principal Payment Holiday Scheme with the Banking Sector SME Lending Co-ordination Mechanism in May 2020. As far as public light bus (PLB) loans are concerned, although the loans held in the name of personal customers are not corporate clients

eligible for the abovementioned Scheme, banks applied the same principles in handling requests for principal payment holiday for loans taken out by personal customers in the PLB industry. As the pandemic had passed, an orderly exit from the related arrangement of deferral of repayment commenced at the end of July 2023, with the focus of the measures shifting from tiding customers over the pandemic to facilitating their resumption of normal loan repayment. To achieve this objective, the partial principal repayment options have been further enhanced so that customers could, during the transition period from August to October 2023, opt for a repayment option that best suited their own circumstances. For those which were not financially able to transition to partial principal repayment, banks would continue to offer principal moratorium on a case-by-case basis.

Specifically for the PLB sector, banks are currently still providing credit reliefs to 150 PLB operators, of which 140 operators opted for partial principal repayment and the remaining 10 opted for principal moratorium. The HKMA understands from banks which are active in PLB lending business that they have all along been supportive of the PLB sector. Despite the recent decline in passenger volume and rising operating costs faced by the PLB sector, banks would not demand early repayments so long as the PLB customers continue to make payments on schedule, though some PLB operators indicated their wish to scale back or close their business in the face of uncertainty over their business prospects. Even though banks have applied enhanced repayment arrangements and principles to eligible PLB customers and have offered them principal moratorium or partial principal repayment options, a small number of PLB operators have decided to stop making payments on their loans. The banks have therefore acted in accordance with the terms of the loan agreements to protect their own interests by taking repossession of the PLBs, which served as the collateral. The HKMA has not collected detailed statistics such as the breakdown of cases with stopped payments.

(3) The Government has been paying close attention to the operating situation of the Red Minibus (RMB) trade and has implemented various measures to help improve the operating environment. Amidst the pandemic over the past three years, aside from the aforementioned Pre-approved Principal Payment Holiday Scheme, the Government also provided various subsidies under the Anti-epidemic Fund, including fuel and non-accountable subsidies. While the said temporary relief measures have ended with the resumption of normalcy, the application period for the Special 100% Loan Guarantee of the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme (Special Scheme) has been extended through the end of March this year. The loans under the Special Scheme are fully guaranteed by the Government, to ease the cash flow problems of eligible small and medium enterprises including RMB operators.

On the other hand, the Government noted that the PLB sector, including RMB trade, has been facing continuous and acute shortage of drivers. To this end, the Government launched the Labour Importation Scheme for Transport Sector – Public Light Bus/Coach Trade in July 2023, to allow importation of non-local drivers by eligible PLB operators on the premise of safeguarding the employment priority for local workers.

In respect of day-to-day operations, the Transport Department provides appropriate and practicable support on the request of the trade to meet operational needs, for example, suitably relaxing or rescinding some passenger pick-up/drop-off restricted zones and prohibited zones for RMBs, taking into account the actual road conditions of individual locations; and permitting overnight parking of RMBs at designated PLB stands where it does not impact road safety or other road users.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the operating situation of PLB and maintain close liaison with relevant stakeholders, with a view to exploring more practicable measures to improve the operating environment of the trade and maintain the reliability of public transport services.

LCQ11: Liaison between politically appointed officials and overseas media

Following is a question by the Hon Adrian Ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs, Miss Alice Mak, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

In December last year when meeting with the Chief Executive on his duty visit to Beijing, the State President reiterated his full support for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government to unite and lead various sectors of society to consolidate and enhance Hong Kong's status as an international financial centre, shipping centre and trade centre, and to promote the better development of Hong Kong. There are views that in order to accomplish the above important tasks entrusted by the State, officials of the Hong Kong SAR Government have the main responsibility to do a good job in telling the world the good stories of Hong Kong, and proactively reaching out to and liaising with overseas media is a very important part of their work. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of interviews given or briefings conducted by politically appointed officials for overseas media since the current-term Government took office, as well as the names of overseas media involved, together with a breakdown by politically appointed official;

(2) whether the Government will proactively engage overseas media in explanatory work and formulate a detailed work plan for telling the good stories of China and Hong Kong this year, thereby properly performing its task of making explanations to media organisations around the world; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether the current-term Government will set performance indicators shortly for the work of politically appointed officials in making rebuttals, clarifications and explanations to overseas media, so as to ensure that politically appointed officials will continuously do a good job in liaising with overseas media, thereby consolidating and enhancing Hong Kong's status as an international metropolis?

Reply:

President,

In response to the questions raised by the Hon Adrian Ho, I give the consolidated reply on behalf of the Government as follows:

The current-term Government attaches great importance to telling good stories of Hong Kong. Government officials often introduce the policies and developments of Hong Kong through the local, Mainland and overseas media.

Since Hong Kong returned to full normalcy last year, the Government has been telling the good stories of Hong Kong through a holistic strategy of inviting visitors to come here and raising the city's profile around the world. On inviting visitors, the Government has been widely inviting international political and business leaders, industry dignitaries, media representatives and other influential figures to come to Hong Kong to understand the latest developments, unlimited opportunities and new tourist attractions on offer in the city and "bring home" the good stories of Hong Kong. Among them, Mainland and overseas journalists are invited to cover international mega events in the city, such as the Art March, Hong Kong FinTech Week, Hong Kong Maritime Week and Asian Financial Forum, and experience Hong Kong's diverse attractions, including tourist spots, activities and delicacies.

Committed to presenting Hong Kong's charm as the Events Capital of Asia to the world, the Government has adopted a proactive approach to attract mega events to anchor in the city, drawing people and media from the Mainland and overseas, and generating positive exposure globally, thereby consolidating and enhancing Hong Kong's status as a cosmopolitan world city. In 2024, Hong Kong will host nearly 150 mega events, with over 80 in the first half of the year.

On going global, the Government has led and organised different delegations to overseas countries, promoting to our stakeholders, including the media, the unparalleled strengths of the city under "one country, two systems" and fostering exchanges and co-operation in various areas, including business, tourism and people-to-people. To tell the good and true stories of Hong Kong to the world, the Government will continue to work with local business dignitaries, members of the Hong Kong Inc, including the Hong Kong Trade Development Council and the Hong Kong Tourism Board, to connect with the media around the world, in addition to exchanging views extensively with the international political and business sectors. The Government will also continue to expand Hong Kong's circle of friends, developing and deepening

exchanges and co-operation with them. Moreover, the Government will launch a new Sponsored Overseas Speaking Engagement Programme, sponsoring renowned scholars and industry leaders to attend overseas events and give speeches to promote Hong Kong.

The Government will continue to monitor media reports about Hong Kong to understand the perceptions of Hong Kong across different sectors in the world, and resolutely refute untrue, biased, misleading or smearing messages to set the record straight.

LCQ15: Combating the smuggling of cats and dogs

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Dennis Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

It has been reported that in recent years, some pet shops have been selling purportedly locally bred cats and dogs which were in fact smuggled into Hong Kong from the Mainland. Many Mainland pet shops have even openly claimed that they can transport cats and dogs to Hong Kong on the same day, meaning that they are able to circumvent the relevant import quarantine requirements. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the number of applications approved by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department for the import of cats and dogs, as well as the number of cats and dogs involved, in each of the past three years;
- (2) of the number of smuggled cats and dogs seized by the Customs and Excise Department, as well as the number of cases involved, in each of the past three years;
- (3) whether it has considered taking the initiative to investigate the sale of smuggled cats and dogs on social platforms through decoy operations;
- (4) as there are views pointing out that the existing stringent quarantine requirement for imported cats and dogs (i.e. a quarantine period of no less than 120 days) is one of the main causes of rampant smuggling of cats and dogs, and the Government indicated in reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council on February 21 this year that it was conducting a risk review to explore the feasibility of shortening the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from certain places in the relevant group (including the Mainland) by measures such as rabies vaccination and rabies antibody titer

testing, of the expected timing for the completion of such work; and

(5) given that there have been cases of cat and dog flesh being sold as food in Hong Kong in recent years, whether it has investigated if the cat and dog flesh in question involves smuggling?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question from Dr the Hon Dennis Lam, after consulting the Security Bureau, is as follows:

(1) To safeguard public and animal health, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) regulates the import of cats and dogs from other places through a permit system, pursuant to the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A). The number of permits issued by the AFCD for import of cats and dogs and number of cats and dogs involved in the past three years are tabulated as follows:

Year	Number of permits for import of cats and dogs	Number of cats and dogs involved
2021	1 795	3 813
2022	1 729	3 747
2023	2 847	5 062

(2) In the past three years, the number of cases of illegally imported cats and dogs seized by the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) and the AFCD, and number of cats and dogs involved are tabulated as follows:

Year	Number of cases	Number of cats and dogs involved
2021	9	101
2022	2	200
2023	13	32

(3) To combat the sale of smuggled cats and dogs on social media platforms, the AFCD has a dedicated investigation team, responsible for monitoring online advertisements related to animal trading and breeding, and handling relevant complaints. The investigation team would proactively investigate suspected cases and depending on the circumstances, adopt suitable enforcement strategies, including conducting "decoy operations". The AFCD also closely liaises with the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China to exchange intelligence.

Furthermore, the C&ED and the HKPF have all along been adopting proactive risk management and intelligence-based enforcement strategies, and mounting effective anti-smuggling operations in a timely manner. They will strengthen intelligence exchange and co-operation with local, the Mainland and overseas law enforcement counterparts, and conduct targeted investigation and joint enforcement actions to fiercely combat smuggling activities.

(4) Rabies is a contagious disease that can be fatal for mammals (including humans). Nearly 60 000 people die of rabies globally every year. To safeguard public health, the AFCD must adopt appropriate measures to prevent the introduction of animal diseases such as rabies into Hong Kong.

The AFCD classifies places into three groups according to different risks of rabies, with reference to information about animal disease surveillance from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Group I includes rabies-free places (i.e. where rabies has been absent for a long time); Group II includes places where rabies cases are few and under effective control; and Group III includes places where rabies cases are reported and not under effective control, as well as places with unknown risks of rabies. Since cats and dogs imported from Group III places may entail higher risks, they currently must be quarantined for at least 120 days.

The AFCD has kept in view WOAH's announcements on latest developments in animal diseases (including rabies) and refined the quarantine requirements concerned when necessary. As biotechnology has developed in recent years, the AFCD is exploring the feasibility of shortening the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from some Group III places (including the Mainland), through measures such as rabies vaccination and rabies antibody titer testing etc. The review is expected to be completed soon and our target is to roll out the new arrangements within this year.

(5) The Government does not tolerate the illegal use of cat and dog flesh for food and will thoroughly investigate suspected cases, including whether smuggling activities are involved. Furthermore, the AFCD, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and C&ED have all along closely collaborated at various control points, including conducting joint operations and exchanging intelligence etc. If suspected cat or dog flesh is discovered, the case would be referred to the AFCD to be strictly followed up.

LCQ21: Top Talent Pass Scheme

Following is a question by the Hon Rock Chen and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

Regarding the Top Talent Pass Scheme (TTPS), will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective longest and shortest lengths of stay in Hong Kong of persons admitted to Hong Kong via the TTPS, as well as the average number of days of their stay so far; whether the Government has any requirement or expectation regarding the length of stay in Hong Kong of such persons; if not, whether it will set a minimum requirement or other conditions on the length of stay in Hong Kong of such persons;

(2) how it ensures that persons admitted to Hong Kong via the TTPS truly work, reside and pay taxes in Hong Kong; whether the Government will step up efforts in monitoring and checking the length of stay, and the status of employment and tax payment of such persons in Hong Kong, so as to prevent abuse of the scheme or wastage of resources by such persons; and

(3) of the total number of persons admitted to Hong Kong via the TTPS investigated by the relevant government departments for allegedly making use of false employment relationships, providing inaccurate documents or failing to pay taxes as required (and the percentage of such number in all persons admitted to Hong Kong via the TTPS) as at the end of December last year, as well as the outcome of the relevant investigations, together with a breakdown by application category of the TTPS (i.e. Category A, B and C)?

Reply:

President,

The Top Talent Pass Scheme (TTPS) seeks to attract top talent with high income, good academic qualifications and extensive work experience to pursue development in Hong Kong. Eligible outside talents are not required to have secured offers of employment in Hong Kong before applications for two-year visas through the TTPS to explore opportunities in Hong Kong. However, they, upon applying for extension of stay before the expiry of their visas granted, will have to be employed, or have established or joined in business in Hong Kong.

The TTPS has received enthusiastic responses since its launch in end-2022. As at end-February this year, we received over 72 000 applications and approved nearly 59 000. Of these, around 44 000 talents arrived in Hong Kong. Along with the approved applications of other talent admission schemes, around 108 000 talents have arrived in Hong Kong since last year.

Our reply, in consultation with the Immigration Department (ImmD), to the Member's questions is as follows:

(1) and (2) A person admitted to Hong Kong under the TTPS will normally be granted an initial stay of two years without other conditions of stay upon

entry. Such relevant arrangement aims to attract talent to explore opportunities in Hong Kong, hence without any requirement imposed on the duration of stay for persons admitted under the TTPS in the first two years.

A person admitted under the TTPS, upon the expiry of his/her first visa, will have to be employed, or have established or joined in business in Hong Kong so that an extension of stay can be granted. When applying for extension of stay, an applicant is required to provide the ImmD with concrete supporting information and documents, including employment contracts, proof and accounts of their business operation and tax demand notes. The ImmD will follow the established mechanism in examining whether an applicant meets the eligibility criteria of extension of stay. If necessary, the ImmD will visit the applicants' reported work and business premises to conduct on-site verification to ensure that only applicants meeting the relevant immigration policies will be admitted into Hong Kong for stay.

The Government has recently conducted first-round follow-up surveys with persons who have arrived in Hong Kong for more than six months with the TTPS visas to understand the situation of their settling in Hong Kong or plans, including employment, accommodation and children's education in Hong Kong. With reference to the data on employment status and income of the TTPS entrants and their spouses, we estimate that the TTPS will contribute directly to Hong Kong's economy by an amount of some \$34 billion per annum, which is equivalent to about 1.2 per cent of the local Gross Domestic Product. In addition to the economic contribution, the TTPS entrants and their spouses are generally younger, with more than half of them aged under 40. They, in addition to bringing their young children to settle in Hong Kong, will add new impetus to the local labour force and bring about positive impact on Hong Kong's demographic structure.

(3) The ImmD has all along been playing a robust gatekeeping role in vetting all visa applications, including those under the TTPS. In case of doubts about the applicants' employment relationships or the authenticity of the documents submitted, the ImmD will promptly follow up and conduct investigations. Should any person be found to have illegally obtained his/her employment visa or residency, the visa or residence status granted will be invalidated according to the laws of Hong Kong. The persons concerned will also be subject to criminal liabilities and removal back to their places of origin.

The eligibility criteria of the TTPS are clear, and the required information and documents are relatively straightforward. The TTPS was launched in end-2022, and the first visas granted to all approved applicants have not yet expired. The ImmD has so far not detected any cases requiring criminal investigation on the authenticity of documents submitted by applicants.

LCQ19: Quality of security personnel

Following is a question by the Hon Lam San-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr Tang Ping-keung, in the Legislative Council today (March 13):

Question:

Many members of the public have relayed that security personnel have long been in short supply and are of varied quality. Many buildings and estates, in a bid to ensure the deployment of security personnel on duty, have lowered their recruitment standards, leading to an increase in crime figures. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has plans to review the application criteria for Security Personnel Permits (SPPs); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (2) whether it will consider introducing a complaint mechanism, with the imposition of penalties or even revocation of SPPs for security personnel with serious dereliction of duty; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (3) given that currently employers can import security personnel through the Enhanced Supplementary Labour Scheme, how the authorities ensure that such imported foreign workers are suitable to work in the security industry?

Reply:

President,

The Security and Guarding Services Ordinance (Cap. 460) (the Ordinance) provides for a regulatory regime for the security services industry which has been operating effectively. Under the regime, all persons who provide security services for reward in Hong Kong must hold a Security Personnel Permit (SPP). The Security and Guarding Services Industry Authority (SGSIA) established under the Ordinance is responsible for formulating the criteria and conditions for issuing an SPP, and the Commissioner of Police (the Commissioner) may issue an SPP only to a person who meets the relevant criteria for providing security services.

In consultation with the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) and the SGSIA, my reply to the Member's question is as follows:

- (1) To ensure the quality of security services, the criteria for issuing an SPP cover areas including age, fitness, character and proficiency in security work. The applicant must be of good character having regard to his employment history, criminal records and other relevant factors. The criteria have already incorporated the essential elements for regulating the security

services industry, and are useful for safeguarding that security personnel are physically fit to perform the job and satisfy the requirements for proficiency in security work, e.g. passing a course-end examination of a recognised security training course. The SGSIA will continue to monitor closely the development of the security services industry and their views, and review the criteria for issuing an SPP as appropriate in a timely manner.

(2) The HKPF attaches great importance to the performance of duties by security personnel in strict compliance with the law and the conditions of the SPPs. Upon receiving complaints relating to the discharge of duties by security personnel from the public, the Police will follow up the cases and conduct investigation. Based on the evidence and nature of each case, the Police will take suitable follow-up actions, such as deciding whether or not to issue warnings or pursue prosecutions. As regards serious cases, under the Ordinance, where, in the opinion of the Commissioner, a holder of an SPP is no longer a fit and proper person to hold the SPP or where the holder of an SPP has been in breach of any condition of the SPP, the Commissioner may apply to the SGSIA for a revocation or suspension of the SPP. The SGSIA may, upon consideration, determine whether or not to revoke the SPP or suspend the SPP for a certain period of time.

(3) Imported workers who wish to perform security work in Hong Kong must apply for an SPP in accordance with the Ordinance. This is to ensure that imported workers also comply with all the stipulated criteria and conditions for performing security work, including fulfilment of the "proficiency in security work" criterion. Imported workers can demonstrate their capability and proficiency in the skills/technique required in performing the job through either passing a trade test or a course-end examination of a security training course recognised by the SGSIA.