

Government welcomes approval of concessionary low-interest loan with 100 per cent guarantee commitment by Finance Committee

The Government welcomed the approval of a new loan guarantee commitment of \$20 billion under the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau to introduce a new Special 100 per cent Guarantee Product under the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme (SFGS) by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council today (March 20). The Government plans to roll out the new product within April this year to provide timely assistance to tide those enterprises in need over during this difficult time.

The Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, said, "The COVID-19 infections have dealt a severe blow to the economic activities and business sentiment in Hong Kong. Many enterprises suffer from a further plunge in business turnover, resulting in a liquidity problem. The situation is particularly acute amongst the small and medium enterprises (SMEs). There is an urgent need to further enhance the assistance to SMEs, thereby reducing business closures and layoffs.

"The Government will provide a 100 per cent guarantee for approved loans taken out by eligible enterprises. In other words, loans that originate from banks will be transferred to the Hong Kong Mortgage Corporation Limited after drawdowns, and all default risks will be borne by the Government with the provision of a 100 per cent guarantee, greatly enhancing the chances for enterprises in securing loans. The Government will provide a total loan guarantee commitment of \$20 billion," he said.

"The application requirements and procedures have also been simplified. Banks need to check mainly the eligibility of loan applicants when processing the applications. With a low interest rate fixed at Prime Rate minus 2.5 per cent per annum, guarantee fees waived and an option for a principal moratorium for the first six months, the new guarantee product will alleviate the burden of SMEs."

Details of the Special 100 per cent Guarantee Product are set out in the Annex.

Generally SMEs have difficulty in obtaining commercial loans due to their relatively small capacity. With the introduction of the 80 per cent and 90 per cent guarantee products under the SFGS in May 2012 and December 2019 respectively, more than 17 800 applications have been approved so far, involving a total loan amount of over \$74 billion, helping nearly 10 000 enterprises in tackling their liquidity problem.

On the other hand, to assist travel agents to tackle financial

difficulties, the Government has established the Travel Agents Subsidy Scheme under the Anti-epidemic Fund. Each eligible travel agent may receive a one-off subsidy of \$80,000. The Travel Agents Registry received over 1 700 registrations during the application period from February 21 to March 13. Amongst these registrations, 99 per cent of the travel agents have received the subsidy.

Announcement by Judiciary

The following is issued on behalf of the Judiciary:

The Judiciary today (March 20) announced that the General Adjourned Period (GAP), which began on January 29, will end on March 22. Court business, unless otherwise indicated, will generally resume on March 23.

The Judiciary previously announced that GAP would end on March 22 if public health situation permits. Having considered the latest public health situation and all the other relevant factors, the Judiciary considers that while GAP may end on March 22 as scheduled, enhanced health preventive measures would need to be introduced for court proceedings and court users coming to court buildings. Moreover, some of the measures introduced during GAP to reduce people flow and crowds at court buildings will need to continue until further notice.

Resumption of court proceedings

Court proceedings will generally resume on March 23 unless they are adjourned pursuant to specific directions by the court. To ensure an orderly resumption of court proceedings, an appropriate buffer period would be provided before hearings, particularly trials, are to be resumed. Parties concerned, be they legally represented or litigants in person, will be given clear notifications and sufficient lead time for preparation of their cases, regardless of whether the hearings are to be re-fixed or proceed as scheduled.

Those who have been summoned for jury empanelment in the High Court and the Coroner's Court during GAP are not required to attend court until further notice in writing.

Court registries/offices have been re-opened in a staggered and progressive manner since March 9. Business of the registries previously suspended will resume normal from March 23. Furthermore, the Judiciary's other offices providing services to court users and the public will also re-open. However, the Canteen in the High Court Building and the Tuck Shop in the West Kowloon Law Court Building will also remain closed until further

notice having regard to public health considerations.

Preventive and crowd management measures

Having struck a careful balance between public health considerations and the orderly resumption of court proceedings and registry services, the Judiciary will continue to put in place appropriate preventive and crowd management measures for the health protection of all people who enter and remain in the court premises. Court users are required to have their body temperature taken and wear a surgical mask before they are allowed to enter and remain in the court premises.

To support the above arrangements, necessary queuing, ticketing and triage system, as well as security controls to limit the number of court users entering and remaining in the Judiciary premises, will be put in place as appropriate. To maintain social distancing, the seating capacity of courtrooms and lobbies are reduced by about 50 per cent. In addition, capacity limits are set for confined areas such as registries and offices to avoid crowding of users.

Parties, legal representatives and other court users are reminded that they should not come to the Judiciary premises to attend court proceedings or conduct businesses at court registry/office if they are subject to quarantine requirement or medical surveillance of the Government. Court users who are subject to any quarantine requirement or medical surveillance of the Government should as soon as practicable apply to the court for permission of absence or inform the court with reasons for absence as appropriate.

Information on the detailed arrangements will be provided and uploaded onto the Judiciary website. Court users are strongly advised to check the updated information on the Judiciary website, and follow the advice of the Judiciary staff and security personnel when they attend court premises for court business.

The Judiciary will remain vigilant and continue to review if any further refinements to the above arrangements would be needed in the light of any changes in the public health situation. The Judiciary will also continue to engage the stakeholders and keep the court users posted as appropriate.

Enquiries and information updates

For general enquiries, the following hotlines will be operated from Monday to Friday from 8.45am to 1pm and from 2pm to 5.30pm:

- General Information: 2869 0869
- Court of Final Appeal: 2123 0123
- High Court: 2523 2212
- Probate: 2840 1683
- District Court: 2845 5696

- Family Court: 2840 1218
- Lands Tribunal: 2771 3034
- Labour Tribunal: 2625 0020
- Small Claims Tribunal: 2877 4068
- Magistrates' Courts: 2677 8373
- Bailiff Section: 2802 7510
- Court Language Section: 2388 1364

The Judiciary will continue to post updated information, including Daily Cause Lists, messages related to the Judiciary's arrangements arising from public health considerations, and advice to court users visiting the courts, on the Judiciary website (www.judiciary.hk). Court users are advised to check the website for updated information as necessary.

Anti-epidemic Fund begins disbursing subsidies to arts and culture sector

A spokesperson for the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) said today (March 20) that to assist the arts and culture sector to tackle the difficulties arising from the COVID-19 epidemic, the Government allocated \$150 million under the Anti-epidemic Fund for launching the "Arts and Culture Sector Subsidy Scheme" to support various arts organisations and freelance arts workers. The first batch of subsidies has been disbursed to the venue partners of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, grantees of the HAB's Arts Capacity Development Funding Scheme, and the Hong Kong Maritime Museum this week. The HAB will also arrange funding disbursements to the nine major performing arts groups in March. These arts groups will make use of the subsidies to pay the salaries of their staff, contractors and freelance workers as much as possible.

The HAB has also entrusted the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) to disburse subsidies. The HKADC has launched the "Support Scheme for Arts and Cultural Sector" in March and has released \$80,000 to 40 HKADC-grantees, as well as \$15,000 to about half of the HKADC-funded/-commissioned project grantees. The HKADC plans to complete funding disbursements to about 200 project grantees in March. These arts groups will also make use of the subsidies to pay the salaries of their staff, contractors and freelance workers as much as possible. This Scheme will also cover non-HKADC-funded projects and freelancers. Relevant application forms are now uploaded to the HKADC's website at www.hkadc.org.hk.

The HAB is now discussing with the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society and the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong regarding the details of the relief fund.

Hong Kong Customs arrests man and woman operating money changer without licence

Hong Kong Customs today (March 20) arrested one man and one woman in Sham Shui Po in connection with a case detected earlier this week on suspected contravention of the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing Ordinance (AMLO).

Customs suspended two licences of a money service operator (MSO) operating seven money changers on March 16 and 17. The female MSO was also suspected of operating another unlicensed money changer in Sham Shui Po.

After follow-up investigation, Customs took action again today to conduct further investigation into the money changers involved and arrested the female MSO, who was suspected of operating an unlicensed money changer and whose licences had been suspended.

A man suspected of participating in the business of the money changer was also arrested today.

The arrested man and woman, aged 57 and 51 respectively, are now being detained for further investigation. A batch of foreign currency exchange records and remittance records was also seized for investigation.

The money changers involved are situated in Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok and Cheung Sha Wan. Customs suspended the licences of the MSO with immediate effect earlier this week for suspected contravention of the AMLO. The MSO has failed to take all reasonable measures, including the customer due diligence (such as examining the identification of customers and remittance purposes) and record-keeping requirements, to mitigate money laundering and terrorist financing risks, and consequently can no longer be a fit and proper person to operate a money service.

Customs has also reminded the persons involved to process the outstanding transactions and payments in an appropriate manner.

Investigation into the case is being conducted according to the AMLO.

Customs reiterates that the department has all along been enforcing the monitoring work of MSOs and conducting compliance regulations and investigations. All licensed money service operators should comply with the requirements of the AMLO. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$1 million and imprisonment for seven years. Consumers are reminded to procure services from licensed money service operators. The register of licensees is accessible from the website of Customs' Money Service Operators Licensing

System at eservices.customs.gov.hk/MSOS/wsrh/001s1?request_locale=en.

MSOs must comply with the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO) when providing money services to customers. Customs will continue to take appropriate enforcement measures if a violation of the TDO is found.

Members of the public may report any suspected violations of the AMLO or the TDO to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk).

Recall of Esmya Tablets 5mg (with photo)

The Department of Health (DH) today (March 20) endorsed a licensed wholesale dealer, Orient Europharma Co Ltd (OEP), to voluntarily recall a pharmaceutical product, Esmya 5mg Tablets (Hong Kong registration number: HK-62553) from patients due to the potential risk of liver injury.

The DH has been monitoring the safety of Esmya since December 2017, when the European Medicines Agency (EMA) started a review on Esmya following reports of serious liver injury, and healthcare professionals have been alerted to the risk. Following the EMA's further recommendation on March 13 this year that women taking Esmya and its generic products for uterine fibroids should stop taking it, the DH has also issued a letter to healthcare professionals informing them about the EMA's announcement.

Based on the latest EMA recommendation, OEP decided to recall the affected product from patients as a precautionary measure.

The product concerned, containing 5mg ulipristal acetate, is a prescription medicine used for the treatment of uterine fibroids. According to OEP, the product has been supplied to the Hospital Authority, private hospitals, local private doctors and pharmacies. Some products have also been exported to Macao.

OEP has set up a hotline (2578 7080) to answer related enquiries.

"So far, the DH has not received any adverse reaction report in connection with the product. The DH will closely monitor the recall," a spokesman for the DH said.

"People who are taking the above product should stop using the medicine and consult their healthcare professionals for appropriate arrangements," the spokesman added.

