

LCQ18: Places for religious activities in Hong Kong

Following is a question by the Hon Benson Luk and a written reply by the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs, Miss Alice Mak, in the Legislative Council today (March 19):

Question:

According to the Hong Kong Fact Sheets issued by the Government in October 2024, more than three million people in Hong Kong adhere to a religion. It is learnt that, from time to time, various religious bodies have a demand for places to conduct religious activities. However, in recent years, some religious bodies have encountered difficulties with the approval processes and procedures when applying for the construction of permanent places for religious activities. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of applications received from religious bodies of different religions for the construction of permanent places for religious activities in the past five years; among such applications, the respective numbers of those that have been approved, those that are pending approval and those that have been rejected, as well as the reasons for the rejection of those applications (set out in a table);

(2) whether the Government currently has established approval mechanisms in place, including a dedicated land allocation system for religious purposes and a special land premium system for the conversion of land designated for non-religious uses into places for religious activities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that and whether the Government will consider introducing specific and relevant mechanisms in the future;

(3) whether the Government will provide assistance or financial support to religious bodies for the construction of permanent religious places; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether the Government will provide funding schemes to religious bodies for the construction of religious places, expedite the vetting and approval of applications in this regard, and assist religious bodies in carrying out renovation or enhancement works for new or existing religious places, so as to promote tourism activities and enable more members of the public to visit and tour such places; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Development Bureau (DEVB), I give the

consolidated reply to the Hon Benson Luk's question on behalf of the Government as follows:

Hong Kong is an open and inclusive city in which religious freedom is the fundamental rights enjoyed by Hong Kong residents as protected by the Basic Law and other relevant legislation. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has been maintaining close liaison with religious groups and attends events organised by them with a view to promoting the communications with them and understanding their needs.

The Home and Youth Affairs Bureau (HYAB) is responsible for liaising with local religious groups and plays a co-ordinating role in local religious affairs. While adhering to the principle of non-intervention of the freedom of religion and religious groups' internal affairs, HYAB listens to the views of respective religious groups and, where necessary, renders assistance to them through appropriate channels.

According to the DEVB, while sites are currently not reserved specifically for religious purposes in the course of land use planning, "Religious Institution" is always permitted under a number of statutory planning uses, including "Government, Institution or Community" and "Commercial" zones. Religious groups may acquire or lease from the market private land or premises for religious use according to their needs. So long as the religious use is compatible with the specified uses under the relevant approved Outline Zoning Plans and land leases, the relevant land or premises may be used for religious purposes without the need for any applications or approval. For example, for a commercial building situated in "Commercial" zone with the permitted use under lease as commercial use, religious use is a permitted use. In fact, a number of churches or places of worship are situated in commercial buildings. If a site is within a "Residential" zone, the proponent only needs to submit a simple planning application to the Town Planning Board (TPB). If the land or premises is restricted to residential use under lease, applications may be made to the Lands Department (LandsD) for lease modification. When processing the relevant applications, the TPB and the LandsD will take into account the views from the relevant bureau(x)/department(s), including the HYAB.

Also, under the current land policy, if religious groups wish to develop religious facilities on Government land, they may apply to the Government by way of private treaty grant (PTG). When processing the relevant land grant applications, the LandsD would consult the relevant bureau(x)/department(s) with regard to the actual circumstances of the case, and seek the HYAB's policy support. If the HYAB's policy support can be secured for the project, there will be concessionary premium arrangement for the respective religious facilities. The HYAB does not provide any other financial support to religious groups for acquiring permanent religious facilities at present.

As regards applications from religious groups to develop permanent religious facilities as mentioned in the question, the LandsD received a total of four PTG applications related to religious use in the past five years or so (three of which are solely for religious use, and the other

application covers other facilities). So far, two applications have been withdrawn by the applicants while the remaining two are under processing. Separately, in the past five years the LandsD also approved two applications, both of which were received prior to 2021. The relevant information is set out in the table below:

Year	Number of Applications Received	Number of Applications Approved*	Number of Applications Withdrawn
2021	1	1	0
2022	2	0	0
2023	0	0	0
2024	1	1	2
2025 (as of March 2025)	0	0	0

Note: The Government does not separately compile statistics on the number of lease modifications or planning applications which are solely for religious use.

*The applications approved in a year do not necessarily correspond to the applications received in the same year.

The relevant bureau(x)/department(s) will continue to expedite the processing of the applications. Meanwhile, the HYAB will continue to keep in touch with religious groups to render appropriate and practicable assistance. Regarding promoting tourism activities as mentioned in the question, it is stated in the Development Blueprint for Hong Kong's Tourism Industry 2.0 promulgated in December 2024 that the Government will focus on diversified development of religious tourism to enrich Hong Kong's tourism offerings, including engaging with religious groups to explore opening up religious venues as tourist attractions on a limited scale without affecting religious activities. The HYAB will assist in liaison with relevant religious groups to explore the feasible arrangements and actively collaborate with the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau's work.

Besides, to encourage the preservation of graded historic buildings, including religious premises, the Commissioner for Heritage's Office of the DEVB launched the Financial Assistance for Maintenance Scheme on Built Heritage in 2008 to provide financial assistance to the owners of privately-owned graded historic buildings, as well as tenants, who are non-profit-making organisations, of Government-owned declared monuments and graded historic buildings for them to carry out minor maintenance works by themselves. Private owners of declared monuments may seek technical advice from the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) or apply to the AMO for the AMO to carry out maintenance and repair works for their declared monuments, and the cost of which will be borne by the AMO.

LCQ5: Students with dependent visa being admitted to local schools

Following is a question by the Hon Lam Chun-sing and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (March 19):

Question:

According to the definition of local students by the Education Bureau (EDB) for the purpose of admission to post-secondary programmes, students holding dependent visa or entry permit who were below 18 years old when they were first issued with such visa or entry permit by the Immigration Department are also defined as local students. There are views that the definition of local students is too loose, which may affect the fairness of competition for places and the accurate use of resources by the University Grants Committee (UGC). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of persons aged between 12 and 17 who were admitted to Hong Kong as dependants under various talent admission schemes in each of the past three years and so far this year, together with a breakdown by age;

(2) whether it will collect data on whether students admitted to UGC-funded programmes through the Joint University Programmes Admissions System are holders of dependent visas, and consider introducing a tiered system of tuition fees for UGC-funded bachelor's degree programmes, under which local students with dependent visas will be charged higher tuition fees; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as it has been learnt that the EDB has indicated earlier that it is reviewing the definition of local students for the purpose of admission to post-secondary institutions, of the current progress of the relevant work?

Reply:

President,

Hong Kong possesses a sound education infrastructure, and diversified and quality basic education, and the quality of teaching and learning ranks high in a number of international rankings. Coupled with highly internationalised and diversified post-secondary education, education in Hong Kong is highly attractive. The eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities provide 15 000 first-year-first-degree (FYFD) places for local students each year, and local senior secondary school graduates may apply for admission to publicly-funded degree programmes through the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) and the non-JUPAS route. As for non-

local students, at present, institutions may admit non-local students (up to 40 per cent) by way of over-enrolment. All institutions follow the principles of fairness and meritocracy in selecting and admitting students in accordance with established mechanisms and procedures.

Under the prevailing arrangements for student admission, students who are dependant visa/entry permit holders who were below 18 years old when first issued with such visa/entry permit by the Immigration Department (ImmD) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region are classified as local students. There have been recent concerns that if the holders of the aforesaid dependant visas have never come to Hong Kong to study or live, but as local students on the basis of their dependant visas alone are allowed to enrol in the subsidised places of the UGC-funded universities and enjoy university fee subsidies, the fairness of competition for the places and the targeted use of public funds will be affected. In this connection, the Government is conducting a comprehensive review of the relevant arrangements and considering various feasible options in a holistic manner, with a view to optimising the use of public resources and addressing the concerns of the community.

Our reply to the questions raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) The Government has since 2022 implemented a series of proactive initiatives to attract talents, including the Top Talent Pass Scheme, etc. From the end of December 2022 to the end of February this year, more than 450 000 applications were received under the various talent admission schemes, of which more than 290 000 were approved. During the same period, around 196 000 talents arrived in Hong Kong, with some of them bringing along their families to settle in Hong Kong. From 2022 to the end of February this year, around 132 000 unmarried dependant children under the age of 18 were permitted to come to Hong Kong as dependants under the various talent admission schemes. (Detailed annual statistics are at Annex.) The ImmD does not maintain statistics on dependant children broken down by age.

(2) According to the JUPAS Office, the number of dependants admitted to UGC-funded FYFD programmes through the JUPAS route in the three years from the 2022-23 to 2024-25 academic years are 62, 68 and 185 respectively.

At present, the tuition fee level for local students of UGC-funded undergraduate programmes is a flat rate of \$42,100 per annum. All non-local students enrolled in UGC-funded programmes are not publicly-funded and the universities are required to charge tuition fees at least sufficient to recover all additional direct costs. In accordance with the above principle, universities may determine the appropriate level of tuition fees for non-local students, having regard to their own circumstances and programme costs, and taking into account various factors. At present, the Government has no plan to change the relevant principles and arrangements. However, for dependant visa holders with residence requirements, we will consider making reference to the practices of other countries/regions and review the conditions and requirements for subsidising tuition fees for local students on undergraduate programmes, e.g. considering requiring the visa holders to have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a certain period of time prior to

admission before they become eligible for a tuition fee subsidy for local students, so as to ensure the effective use of public funds.

(3) The review of the definition of "local students" is now well underway. We have met with different stakeholders and listened to their views. At the same time, we have made reference to the policies of the United Kingdom and Singapore, and been in close contact with other policy bureaux and departments. We are consolidating comments from various parties, conducting in-depth examination and carefully assessing the feasibility of different options and their implementation details, having regard to their impact on the attractiveness of various talent admission schemes, tertiary institutions' arrangements for student admission, and entry restrictions for overseas persons. At the same time, in order to minimise the impact of the new measures on the children of talents, we will actively consider putting in place transitional arrangements. The Education Bureau (EDB) will announce the latest arrangements as soon as possible after considering various options.

President, education is the key to a hundred-year plan. Education is the key to nurturing talents, who are the driving force behind Hong Kong's development and the foundation of a strong nation building and national revival. Under the leadership of the Committee on Education, Technology and Talents, the EDB will continue to proactively complement various measures for the admission of talents. Whilst strengthening the educational support for children of incoming talents, the EDB will continuously nurture local talents, enhance the quality of education in Hong Kong, and tie in with the direction of the integrated development of education, technology and talents.

Thank you, President.

[Inspection of aquatic products imported from Japan](#)

In response to the Japanese Government's plan to discharge nuclear-contaminated water at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene issued a Food Safety Order which prohibits all aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds originating from the 10 metropolis/prefectures, namely Tokyo, Fukushima, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Chiba, Gunma, Tochigi, Niigata, Nagano and Saitama, from being imported into and supplied in Hong Kong.

For other Japanese aquatic products, sea salt and seaweeds that are not prohibited from being imported into Hong Kong, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department is conducting comprehensive radiological tests to verify that the radiation levels of these products do not exceed the guideline levels before they are allowed to be

supplied in the market.

As the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water is unprecedented and will continue for 30 years or more, the Government will closely monitor the situation and continue to implement the enhanced testing arrangements. Should anomalies be detected, the Government does not preclude further tightening the scope of the import ban.

From noon on March 18 to noon today (March 19), the CFS conducted tests on the radiological levels of 263 food samples imported from Japan, which were of the "aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt" category. No sample was found to have exceeded the safety limit. Details can be found on the CFS's thematic website titled "Control Measures on Foods Imported from Japan"

(www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme_rafs/programme_rafs_fc_01_30_Nuclear_Event_and_Food_Safety.html).

In parallel, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has also tested 50 samples of local catch for radiological levels. All the samples passed the tests. Details can be found on the AFCD's website (www.afcd.gov.hk/english/fisheries/Radiological_testing/Radiological_Test.html).

The Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) has also enhanced the environmental monitoring of the local waters. No anomaly has been detected so far. For details, please refer to the HKO's website (www.hko.gov.hk/en/radiation/monitoring/seawater.html).

From August 24, 2023, to noon today, the CFS and the AFCD have conducted tests on the radiological levels of 123 505 samples of food imported from Japan (including 81 108 samples of aquatic and related products, seaweeds and sea salt) and 28 478 samples of local catch respectively. All the samples passed the tests.

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LCQ14: Healthcare services for Islands District

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hok-fung and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (March 19):

Question:

It is learnt that the intake of the newly-built public housing estates in Tung Chung, namely Cheung Tung Estate and Chun Tung Estate, will commence progressively this year, and the population in the district is expected to increase by 30 000 or more within the year. On the other hand, there are views that the North Lantau Hospital (NLH), which has been serving the district for more than 11 years, has yet to be developed into a general hospital and only provides seven specialist outpatient services, making it necessary for some patients to travel a long distance to seek consultation at the Princess Margaret Hospital. Regarding the healthcare services for Islands District, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows if the Hospital Authority (HA) has plans to provide all of the 15 specialist services at NLH; if it has, of the timetable and the next specialist outpatient service to be provided at the hospital; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as it has been reported that Stage 1 of Phase 2 development of the NLH project was completed last year, whether the Government knows when HA plans to commence Stage 2 of the development project; if so, of the details;

(3) whether the Government has assessed the demand for healthcare services of the additional population brought about by the two aforesaid newly-built public housing estates in Tung Chung, and the time needed for residents moving into these two estates to arrange for a change of the cluster hospitals they attend;

(4) whether it knows the current and projected staff establishment and the vacancy rates of NLH for the next three years, together with a breakdown by specialist outpatient service; of the number of days on which each specialist outpatient service is currently provided at the hospital per week; whether it has assessed if such specialist outpatient services can meet the demand of existing patients; and

(5) given that while the Government has proposed in the 2024 Policy Address to develop tourism in the Ex-Lamma Quarry area, it is learnt that clinics in the district cannot provide round-the-clock services at present, whether the Government will enhance the services of North Lamma General Outpatient Clinic, so as to cope with the demand arising from future development; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Hospital Authority (HA), the consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Hok-fung is as follows:

(1), (3) and (4) The HA plans and develops various public healthcare services

on a cluster basis, taking into account a number of factors, including the increase of service demand arising from population growth and demographic changes, rising prevalence of chronic diseases, technology advancement, manpower supply as well as service arrangements of the various clusters. The HA monitors the utilisation of various healthcare services and plans future hospital services according to the population projection parameters of various districts of Hong Kong and the development plans of the Government.

Currently, Tung Chung falls within the catchment area of the Kowloon West Cluster (KWC). The five hospitals in the KWC, namely the Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH), the Caritas Medical Centre (CMC), the Yan Chai Hospital (YCH), the Kwai Chung Hospital and the North Lantau Hospital (NLTH), provide comprehensive clinical services to the residents of the district. Based on the Projections of Population Distribution 2023-2031 of the Planning Department, the population of the Tung Chung New Town is about 150 000 in 2025. Under the First Hospital Development Plan (HDP) which is currently being implemented and the Second HDP which is being planned, the Government and the HA will, having taken the healthcare service needs brought by the projected population growth in the relevant districts (including the Tung Chung New Town Extension) into consideration, take forward and plan hospital development projects to increase the number of beds and other healthcare facilities. The HA will also keep in view the utilisation of healthcare services in the KWC to conduct cluster planning and adjust the service provision in the cluster in accordance with the latest projection of service demand, with a view to meeting the healthcare service needs of their patients (including the residents of Tung Chung).

If residents who have newly moved to Tung Chung wish to receive medical consultations in hospitals of the KWC due to personal choice, travel distance to/from hospitals or physical condition, etc., they may apply for the HA's referral services according to their own needs. The HA will process such applications as soon as practicable.

With regard to the manpower establishment and the provision of specialist out-patient services in the NLTH, the HA provides healthcare services through multi-disciplinary teams comprising doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and supporting grade staff. At present, all the planned projects for Phase 1 development of the NLTH have been put into service, and necessary staff have been recruited according to operational needs. As at February 28, 2025, the NLTH has about 800 staff and 30 vacancies across different staff groups. Arrangements for the manpower establishment of the NLTH in future are made in accordance with the HA annual plan, which is formulated based on service needs. The HA will assess the manpower needs from time to time and deploy manpower flexibly to meet service and operational needs.

The NLTH is currently providing the following specialist out-patient services with the service frequency as below:

Specialist out-patient service	Number of days of service in a week
Medicine and Geriatrics	4
Surgery	1
Urology	1
Orthopaedics and Traumatology	4
Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine	3
Gynaecology	1
Psychiatry	2

Besides, all beds in NLTH have been commissioned. As at December 2024, the bed number at the hospital is 180.

To ensure the effective use of resources and that the service volume of individual specialist out-patient services are sufficient for the healthcare staff's accumulation of clinical experience to ensure the quality of services, the various hospitals in the same cluster will provide different and complementary services to provide comprehensive and optimal services to residents in the cluster's catchment area. The hospitals in KWC will provide the NLTH with the appropriate service support, such as patients requiring emergency surgeries or having complex medical conditions will be supported by PMH or transferred to PMH for further treatment. Support will be provided to special cases of the Eye as well as the Ear, Nose and Throat specialities by the CMC and the YCH respectively. The KWC will review and plan the clinical services of the five hospitals in the cluster (including the NTLH) from time to time and adjust the service provision as necessary.

(2) NLTH Development Phase 2, Stage 1 project, i.e. the Hospital Authority Supporting Services Centre (HASSC), is amongst the projects under the First HDP. Following the funding approval by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in 2020, the construction works commenced in the fourth quarter of the same year. The HASSC was completed in 2024 and will commission in phases starting from March 2025. It will provide services including laundry, patient meals, critical personal protective equipment and key linen items storage, and a data centre for supporting the operations of NLTH and other public hospitals.

As for the next stage of development for the NLTH, with the changes in the planning and development situation of Hong Kong, the Health Bureau and the HA are reviewing the Second HDP. Amongst others, in view of the planning and development strategies for the whole territory and regions announced by the Planning Department, including the "Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030" and the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy, as well as the corresponding population projections of Hong Kong including the latest changes in overall population, its distribution and demographics, the Health Bureau and the HA have to make reference to the latest future planning of the whole territory (including the

development concepts of the Northern Metropolis), population statistics, population distribution and demographics projections of various districts, and the population policy and talent attraction initiatives of the Government, adopt a planning horizon of up to 2040 and beyond for the Second HDP, and to project the healthcare service demand and consider the supply and conditions of the land required, for optimising the Second HDP.

The Government also considers factors such as the needs for and cost-effectiveness of renovation, refurbishment, redevelopment or addition of facilities for individual hospitals; and the convenience of access of the public for healthcare services under various major transport infrastructure development plans, etc., for determining the distribution, scale and priority, etc. of various hospital development projects under the Second HDP. Upon completion of the review, the Government will announce the details of the Second HDP in due course.

(5) Currently, the public healthcare services on the Lamma Island is mainly provided by the Hong Kong East Cluster of the HA. The HA has two general out-patient clinics (GOPCs) on the Lamma Island, namely the North Lamma GOPC and the Sok Kwu Wan GOPC. The North Lamma GOPC provides service from Mondays to Fridays during the daytime and on Saturday mornings, with a doctor stationed at the clinic; whereas the Sok Kwu Wan GOPC provides service from Mondays to Saturdays during the daytime, with a doctor stationed at the clinic from Mondays to Fridays and a registered nurse providing nursing and support services during the remaining service hours.

The GOPCs mainly provide service to chronic disease patients with stable medical conditions and episodic disease patients with relatively mild symptoms, and are not intended for provision of emergency services. If any resident of the island encounters emergency situations, the clinic staff will handle the matter according to the contingency mechanism. The clinic nurse will, based on the condition of the patient, contact the accident and emergency (A&E) department and provide appropriate treatment/care to the patient upon the doctor's advice, or contact other government department(s) for assistance for the transferral of the patient to the A&E department, to ensure that patients with severe and acute symptoms will receive the appropriate treatment and support.

Due to the geographical location of the Lamma Island, apart from the provision of general out-patient services, the HA also provides 24-hour first-aid services by a registered nurse at the North Lamma GOPC to ensure that the residents there can receive immediate first-aid services outside the service hours of the GOPCs.

While planning for and developing the provision of public primary healthcare services, the Government needs to take into account a number of factors, including the delivery model of the primary healthcare service, demographic changes, distribution of the target groups, the provision of and demand for primary healthcare services within the district, etc. Having regard to the cost-effectiveness of providing overnight general out-patient service and the additional demand for healthcare manpower, the HA has no plan

to provide overnight general out-patient service on Lamma Island at this stage based on the consideration of effective use of healthcare resources.

In the long run, the HA will dovetail with the Government's overall development policies, continue to closely monitor the demand for public primary healthcare services in the district and plan for and adjust the services with reference to the demand, so as to provide suitable primary healthcare services to the residents in the district.