

TD's enhanced measures for processing licensing applications during epidemic

The Transport Department (TD) announced today (March 25) that having balanced the public health risks and in order to avoid crowdedness to reduce the spread of the virus in the community, the Licensing Offices of the TD have suspended walk-in counter services since February 10, but have continued processing applications for renewal of a full driving licence/vehicle licence or applications for an international driving permit with scheduled appointments, as well as licensing applications submitted through drop-in boxes, by post or online (except for the direct issue of a full Hong Kong driving licence). The TD is aware of the concerns of members of the public that the processing time of licensing applications has been longer than usual during the period. To cope with public demands, the TD has strengthened the related services as below:

Online appointments

The TD has expanded the online appointment services and quotas by phases. At present, other than making online appointments for renewals of a full driving licence/vehicle licence or applications for an international driving permit, members of the public can also make online appointments for applications for transfer of vehicle ownership. An applicant can submit a transfer of ownership application and/or a vehicle licence renewal application for the same vehicle within the scheduled time slot. Besides, to cater for service needs, the TD has increased the quota for online appointments from 1 000 per day originally to 4 500 per day from now to the end of April, and the opening period for appointments has been extended from two weeks in the past to 10 weeks, to facilitate members of the public to make early arrangements.

Manpower arrangements

The handling of the licensing applications submitted via drop-in box, by post or online involves more steps than when they are submitted instantly over the counters, and therefore requires longer processing time. As the renewals of the licences are essential public service, the Licensing Offices have been working in full strength. This apart, the Licensing Offices have also deployed staff from other divisions of the TD and employed additional manpower outside the establishment to assist in handling and expediting the processing of the licensing applications received.

Application processing procedures

Licensing Offices in general process licensing applications in the order of date of receipt and accord priority as much as practicable to processing renewal applications for licences/permits for which the validity period has expired or is about to expire. If the vehicle licences of the applicants are about to expire or there are any reasons requiring early renewals, applicants

can mark on the envelope the vehicle registration marks and the expiry dates of the vehicle licences or state the reason concerned, and leave contact telephone numbers on the application forms. This is to facilitate the staff of the Licensing Offices to identify and follow up on urgent applications.

To avoid unnecessary delays, the TD appeals to the public to submit licence renewal applications two to three weeks before the expiry dates. Besides, to facilitate timely processing of the application by the Licensing Offices, members of the public should ensure that the respective application form is duly completed and all necessary supporting documents and a crossed cheque with the correct amount of payable fee are attached before submission. Please refer to the links below for the supporting documents required for the common licensing services.

Vehicle licensing:

www.td.gov.hk/en/public_services/licences_and_permits/vehicle_licences/vehicle_licensing_and_registration/index.html

Driver licensing:

www.td.gov.hk/en/public_services/licences_and_permits/driving_licences/driver_licensing/index.html

A female Police officer preliminarily tested positive for COVID-19

A 22-year-old female officer who is stationed in Sham Shui Po Police Station was preliminarily tested positive for the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). She is posted to a patrol sub-unit and has no travel history in the past 14 days. Whilst on duty yesterday (March 24), she felt unwell and was not involved in any frontline duties that required interaction with members of the public. She later went to a hospital for treatment and was preliminarily tested positive for COVID-19.

In the interest of public health, the Police have deployed the following measures:

1. Before further assessment by the Centre for Health Protection, the officers stationed at the same sub-unit will not conduct duties that require interaction with members of the public;
2. Starting from February 29, all officers working at Police stations are required to wear masks, and everyone entering any station needs to have their body temperature measured in order to ensure health safety;
3. Police are in touch with the Department of Health (DH) regarding the arrangement to sterilise all facilities in the Police station concerned, including the report room and vehicles;
4. Police will deploy resources flexibly to ensure provision of emergency services of the district concerned remains unaffected;

5. Police have reminded officers to reduce social contact to minimise risks of infection, and pay attention to physical health. If feeling unwell, they should consult a doctor and report the case.

Police are highly concerned about the case and will maintain close communication with the DH and provide assistance in tracing the pathology, by proactively providing information such as the duty record and roster of the officer concerned. Arrangements will be made for close contacts to be conveyed to quarantine centres to undergo quarantine.

Public hospitals daily update on COVID-19 cases

The following is issued on behalf of the Hospital Authority:

As at noon today (March 25), public hospitals had reported to the Department of Health the admission of 199 patients (95 male and 104 female, aged five months to 76 years) in the past 24 hours who met the reporting criteria of COVID-19. Appropriate tests have been arranged for the patients.

There are 469 patients under isolation currently. So far, 106 patients who had COVID-19 confirmed or probable infections have been discharged upon recovery.

The Hospital Authority will maintain close contact with the Centre for Health Protection to monitor the latest developments and to inform the public and healthcare workers on the latest information in a timely manner.

Statement by Chief Justice of Court of Final Appeal

The following is issued on behalf of the Judiciary:

The following is a statement by the Chief Justice of the Court of Final Appeal, Mr Geoffrey Ma Tao-li, today (March 25):

"Our community is facing challenges arising from the COVID-19 virus that are unprecedented in terms of seriousness and extent. The Judiciary has certainly not been shielded, whether directly or indirectly, from the effects

brought about by the virus. Almost 18 per cent of the annual caseload of the courts at all levels have been affected since cases began to be adjourned on January 29, 2020 (this was the start of what has been referred to as the General Adjourned Period (the GAP)). Given the fact that the administration of justice has been adversely affected by the current situation, the Hong Kong Bar Association, the Law Society of Hong Kong, the Department of Justice and many other interested parties – not to mention the public as a whole – are obviously concerned over the disruption and inconvenience that have been caused.

"Many organisations and people including those earlier mentioned, have given their views and assisted the Judiciary in devising and planning appropriate measures during this time. I am grateful for all their input and assistance. The Judiciary has from the earliest stages been active in planning and taking action to deal with the problems caused by the effect of the virus on court operations. Judges and Judicial Officers, and our Judiciary staff have worked constantly and tirelessly in this regard.

"However, by reason of the latest developments, concerns have emerged in the past few days over the uncertain duration of the GAP, and if the return to the normal operations of the courts is to last into the foreseeable future, over what further measures the Judiciary plans to take to alleviate the situation. I understand and share these concerns. With the progress that had been made dealing with the health situation in Hong Kong, we had originally planned the resumption of normal activities in the courts to take place last Monday (March 23). Unfortunately, this was not possible in the light of events over the past few days and we had to announce as a matter of urgency the continuation of the GAP for another two weeks. This has made immediately pressing the Judiciary's consideration of how to deal with the further suspension of court services. Here, I would like briefly to highlight the work that we have been doing in this regard. Fuller details are contained in an Information Note that has been prepared for the Legislative Council Panel on the Administration of Justice and Legal Services issued today. The Information Note also provides details of the work that has been done so far during the GAP. I refer you to that Information Note.

"Up to now, we have adopted a conservative approach to the types of cases that have been heard during the GAP. A number of exceptions aside (these have involved special features), mainly urgent and essential hearings took place. The reason for this approach was public health and safety. Court buildings are places where at any one time many people are gathered and the potential spread of infections is a very real one. It should also be noted that not only do court hearings take place in court buildings, there are also registry and other services. All of these activities also involve the presence of many people. Public health and safety remain paramount considerations in determining our approach to the present problems.

"That said, we have nevertheless been urgently exploring further ways to increase court services during this time without compromising the health and safety of court users, our staff and judges. For example, many judges have been proactively managing cases (for example by giving appropriate

directions) and making determinations on paper (thus avoiding the need to have parties physically present in court). Further, as far as hearings are concerned, the judiciary is actively considering expanding the scope of hearings (beyond just urgent or essential matters) by hearing submissions by telephone, by video-conferencing or similar means of visual aid and generally making use of technology. The greater use of technology has been urged on the Judiciary and generally I agree with this approach. The only qualifications that I would wish to make here is that the use of such means to facilitate hearings must not only be logistically feasible but also legal in terms of being permitted by applicable court rules and procedures. Additionally, information technology security issues must be addressed.

"If the GAP is to be extended and the return to normality delayed, I wish to assure the community that the Judiciary is doing its best to deal with the situation. Meetings with interested parties have taken place and continue to take place. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the present challenge faced by the community is a public health and safety one, and in considering what best course to take, we must at all times bear in mind the health and safety of the public, court users, our staff and judges. I hope we will be able to return to normality soon but if the GAP is to continue, we will do our best to have the courts operate as much as practicable and safe."

Effective Exchange Rate Index

The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Wednesday, March 25, 2020 is 109.2 (down 0.1 against yesterday's index).