

S for IT to visit Beijing

The Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Mr Nicholas W Yang, will leave for Beijing this evening (December 4). He will call on the Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Wang Zhigang, tomorrow (December 5) and return to Hong Kong at night.

In his absence, the Under Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Dr David Chung, will act as Secretary for Innovation and Technology.

LCQ18: Health impacts of tear gas residue

Following is a question by the Hon Wu Chi-wai and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

The Government has repeatedly stated that given the short duration of combustion of tear gas rounds, cyanide produced during combustion will be in a very small quantity and will quickly disperse in the air, and that no literature on dioxin poisoning cases caused by the use of tear gas has been found. However, some members of the public are still concerned about the adverse health impacts of tear gas. Several secondary schools in the vicinity of the locations where a massive quantity of tear gas rounds had been fired suspended classes earlier and hired experts to carry out thorough checking and cleaning at the campus. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Government provides services for checking and removing residues of tear gas at public facilities such as schools, hospitals, elderly centres and MTR stations; if so, of the respective numbers of times for which such checking and removal services were provided since June this year, and set out by name of facility the dates on which such services were provided and whether tear gas residue was found; if it does not provide such services, whether it will do so;

(2) whether the Government has issued guidelines to the managers of such public facilities to advise on the precautionary measures to be taken during the firing of tear gas rounds by the Police, as well as the arrangements on checking and cleaning to be made afterwards so as to reduce the impacts of

tear gas residue on users of such facilities; if so, of the details;

(3) given that the Police have recently fired a massive quantity of tear gas rounds at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and in the vicinity of Nathan Road, of the measures the Government has put in place to ensure that the indoor air quality of the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Museum of History conforms with the safety standards;

(4) of the measures in place to assist owners of the private properties (e.g. shopping malls and housing estates) in the vicinity of the locations where tear gas rounds were fired in ensuring that the indoor air quality of their properties conforms with the safety standards;

(5) whether the Environmental Protection Department will send staff to collect environmental samples from the locations where the Police have fired a massive quantity of tear gas rounds repeatedly (e.g. the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Nathan Road) so as to test if there are toxic substances from tear gas rounds remaining in the community; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(6) whether it has been stated in the guidelines issued by the authorities to the cleansing service contractors for cleaning streets or public housing estates that at the locations where tear gas rounds have been fired, practices which will stir up residual materials (e.g. the use of high pressure water jets) should not be adopted; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Home Affairs Bureau, the Development Bureau, the Environment Bureau and the Transport and Housing Bureau, my reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has all along been concerned about the environmental hygiene conditions of public places and provide street cleansing services on a routine basis. After large-scale public order events, the FEHD will, subject to road conditions, provide timely street cleansing services and increase the frequency of cleaning the affected streets.

As for non-public places, cleansing services should be provided by venue owners/management. Health information on tear gas, with details on post-exposure treatments and recommendations on cleaning procedures, has been made available to the public on the website (www.chp.gov.hk/en/healthtopics/content/460/102308.html) of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health.

Specifically, it is preferable to use disposable cleaning items for cleaning up tear gas residues. Suitable personal protective equipment such as masks, rubber gloves and rubber aprons, etc. should be worn. In general,

surface with residual materials can be wiped using a cloth soaked with soapy water, but hot water should not be used in order to avoid evaporation of the residues. Also, residual materials should not be stirred up and therefore tools such as high pressure water jet and brooms, as well as electric fans, should not be used. The disposable cleaning items should be properly packed (such as in a sealed plastic bag) after cleaning and then disposed of.

(3) In response to the unforeseen circumstances that occurred lately in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and its vicinity, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) took necessary measures at the Hong Kong Science Museum and the Hong Kong Museum of History, including co-ordinating with the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD) to close the fresh air dampers of the air-conditioners with a view to reducing the impact of outdoor environment on the indoor air quality. Both museums were closed from November 17 to 26, 2019, during which the venues were cleaned up by the LCSD and arrangement was made for the EMSD to clean or replace the filters of the air-conditioning system. This was to ensure that the indoor conditions of the museums are suitable for public visits. The two museums are now re-opened.

(4) and (5) Tear gas is mainly a particulate compound. Since it is heavier than air, it will settle on the ground soon after it is launched. The residue in general will settle on surface of objects, and it will not suspend in the air for a long time as well as its dispersion is limited.

The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) has analysed the particulate matter (PM) data recorded at the air quality monitoring stations near the areas where tear gas was launched since June 2019. The analysis is done by comparing the PM levels recorded at the monitoring station during the period when tear gas was launched and the period before, as well as comparing the data with those recorded at other monitoring stations near areas where no tear gas was launched. According to the analysis, the EPD did not find any anomalies in the PM levels recorded at the monitoring stations near the areas where tear gas was launched. This shows that tear gas does not cause any significant increase in the PM concentration in the area.

On the other hand, there were instances showing that when arson activities took place near a monitoring station, the PM concentrations recorded at the station increased to a high level, which was almost double the normal levels for that day, for several hours. This reflects that arson activities will significantly affect the air quality in the vicinity.

(6) The FEHD has issued guidelines to its staff and cleansing service contractors, while the Housing Department, having referred to the CHP's health information, has done the same for its cleansing service contractors. These guidelines contain points to note on cleaning chemical residues and stipulate that high pressure water jet should not be used in order to avoid stirring up the residual materials. Also, when operating street washing vehicles, staff of the FEHD should either turn off the auxiliary engines or adjust the water pressure of the nozzles to the minimum to avoid stirring up the residual materials.

LCQ8: Services for the elderly

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Yiu-chung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

For those elderly persons who have been confirmed after assessment to have the needs for long term care services, their applications may be put on a Central Waiting List for Subsidised Long Term Care Services (CWL) to wait for provision of subsidised long term care services, i.e. residential care services (RCS) or community care services (CCS). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of (i) the number of elderly persons who requested their names be removed from CWL and the reasons for that, and (ii) the number of elderly persons who had been allocated a place in a residential care home (RCH) but eventually declined the offer and the reasons for that, in each of the past five years; among such elderly persons, the number of those who were assessed to be suitable for receiving RCS only;

(2) as it is learnt that those elderly persons on CWL who are soon to be placed to a RCH will be included in the small pools list, of the following details in each of the past five years:

(i) the average time span from the elderly persons being included in the small pools list to being allocated a RCH place;

(ii) among the elderly persons on the small pools list, the number and percentage of those who had been allocated a RCH place but eventually declined the offer, and the reasons for that; and

(iii) among the elderly persons who had waited for RCS, the number and percentage of those who declined to be included in the small pools list;

(3) of the average (i) monthly and (ii) full-year numbers of vacant places and the vacancy rates in the total number of subsidised RCH places in Hong Kong in each of the past five years; the average (iii) monthly and (iv) full-year numbers of vacant places and the vacancy rates of those RCHs preferred by the elderly persons on the small pools list, in each of the past five years;

(4) of the number, in each month of the past two years, of the elderly persons on CWL who had been assessed to be suitable for both RCS and CCS; among these elderly persons, (i) the number of those "inactive" cases in which the elderly persons chose to receive CCS, and (ii) the number of cases in which the elderly persons had initially chosen to wait for RCS but subsequently received CCS;

(5) among the elderly persons on CWL, of the respective numbers and percentages, in each month of the past two years, of those elderly persons who, after assessment, were arranged to wait for (i) RCS only and (ii) CCS only;

(6) given that the Government reinstated in October last year the population-based planning ratios for elderly services facilities in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, of (i) the number of places for the two aforesaid types of services that should be provided according to the calculation based on such ratios, and (ii) the actual number of places available for these two types of services, in each District Council district at present, as well as the details of the calculation methods; when the Government will review such ratios; and

(7) whether the Government, when planning the elderly service places on a territory-wide basis, has included the service quotas under the Pilot Scheme on Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly and under the Pilot Scheme on Residential Care Service Voucher for the Elderly?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) From 2014 to 2018, amongst the applicants on the Central Waiting List (CWL) for subsidised residential care places for the elderly, the numbers of applicants withdrawing their applications, rejecting offers of placement, and being assessed to be suitable for residential care services (RCS) only amongst those rejecting offers of placement are as follows –

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of applicants withdrawing applications	2 205	2 244	2 191	1 961	2 606
Number of applicants rejecting offers of placement	2 221	2 283	2 211	1 988	3 355
Number of applicants being assessed to be suitable for RCS only among those rejecting offers of placement	577	526	562	575	829

Applicants withdraw applications and reject offers of placement for various reasons, such as being in receipt of subsidised community care services (CCS), changing preferences for location and dietary requirements of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHes), etc. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) does not maintain statistics on average waiting time between applicants' entry to the small pool and admission to RCHes, applicants

declining admission to RCHEs after entering the small pool and applicants refusing to enter the small pool.

(3) At present, the demand for subsidised residential care places for the elderly is acute. Whenever vacancies arise, the SWD will arrange admission by applicants on the CWL. The SWD does not maintain statistics on the duration of subsidised residential care places for the elderly remaining vacant.

(4) and (5) From 2017-18 to 2018-19, the number of applicants assessed to be suitable for both RCS and CCS, suitable for RCS only and suitable for CCS only in assessments conducted are as follows –

	2017-18	2018-19
Number of applicants suitable for both RCS and CCS	19 210	20 165
Number of applicants suitable for RCS only	11 634	11 332
Number of applicants suitable for CCS only	447	441

For the applicants assessed to be suitable for both RCS and CCS, when they receive CCS, their applications for RCS will automatically be classified as "inactive". These applicants can seek to re-activate their RCS option if needed in future. Amongst the applicants assessed to be suitable for both RCS and CCS, the SWD does not maintain statistics on the number of RCS cases being classified as "inactive" upon receipt of CCS and those initially admitted to RCS but later accepted CCS.

(6) According to the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines updated in December 2018, the standard of RCS provision is 21.3 subsidised beds per 1 000 elderly persons aged 65 or above. The SWD plans RCS on a five-cluster basis (i.e. Hong Kong, Kowloon East, Kowloon West, New Territories East and New Territories West). The Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines should be applied flexibly at the cluster level, with the SWD considering a number of factors, particularly the distribution of RCS in various districts within the cluster. Other factors to be considered include the land supply in different districts within the cluster, service demand as a result of population growth and demographic changes, as well as provision of different types of RCS in the clusters. As at October 2019, there are in total around 28 000 subsidised RCS places in the territory.

For CCS, the planning standard is 17.2 subsidised places per 1 000 elderly persons aged 65 or above. The planning standard should be applied flexibly at the district level, with the SWD considering a number of factors, including the distribution of CCS, the land supply and service demand as a result of population growth and demographic changes. As at October 2019, there are in total around 13 700 service places for CCS in the territory.

(7) Adopting the "money-following-the-user" funding mode, the Pilot Scheme on Community Care Service Voucher (CCSV) for the Elderly and the Pilot Scheme on Residential Care Service Voucher (RCSV) for the Elderly provide additional choices for the elderly persons. Voucher users can select and switch recognised service providers according to their individual preferences. As the two schemes are still at the pilot stage, they are not included in the number of service places stated in the reply for Part 6 above. The Government has commissioned consultants to conduct evaluation studies on the two schemes, and will consider the way forward and long-term arrangements for the CCSV and RCSV with reference to the findings of the studies.

LCQ10: Proof of identity as journalists

Following is a question by the Hon Wong Ting-kiung and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Lau Kong-wah, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

At present, there is no official organisation in Hong Kong responsible for issuing press cards. According to the constitution of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), its membership is classified into six categories, among which only full members may be issued with press cards. It has been reported that during a number of public meetings and processions held since June this year, some demonstrators at the scene disguised themselves as journalists by wearing self-made press cards in order to conceal their identity. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of persons arrested, prosecuted and convicted since June this year for using forged press cards; the punishments imposed on those convicted;

(2) as some police officers have indicated that they find it difficult to distinguish between the different types of membership cards and press cards issued by HKJA and to judge the authenticity of such cards, of the measures put in place by the Government to assist police officers in verifying whether the cardholders are journalists during law enforcement; and

(3) given that HKJA is only a trade union registered under the Trade Unions Ordinance (Cap. 332) rather than a professional body vested with statutory powers to regulate its members, and that HKJA and the various news organisations issue press cards on their own, making it difficult for people to ascertain if the cardholders are journalists, whether the Government will

set up a statutory body responsible for issuing official press cards; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Security Bureau and the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, I provide a consolidated reply to the Hon Wong Ting-kwong's question as follows:

(1) In August this year, the Police received a report from the Hong Kong Journalists Association about a suspected forged press card found at the protest scene. In addition, when handling recent protests, the Police found that some people dressed as journalists left the protest scene after being enquired by the Police's Media Liaison Team, or engaged in acts inconsistent with the reporting work of professional journalists, which include obstructing the Police's arrest operations. This raised doubts about the authenticity of their identity as journalists. The Police do not maintain the detailed figures requested in the question. The Police would like to remind the public that anyone who produces, holds or uses a forged press card may commit forgery-related offences and is liable to a maximum penalty of imprisonment for 14 years.

(2) The Police respect press freedom and the media's right to reporting. While the Police will make every effort to facilitate media reporting as far as circumstances permit during operations, it is their statutory duty to ensure public safety and public order. Both the press and the Police have their respective responsibilities. Mutual understanding and co-operation would be conducive to the work of both sides.

Hong Kong does not have any official organisation responsible for issuing press identification. As stated in the question, according to the constitution of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, only full members may be issued with press cards. For the Police, relevant guidelines have been formulated for officers to identify and verify the identity of media practitioners during public order events or other police operations by proof of identity or documents issued by media organisations or associations. When covering public order events, media practitioners should bring along proof of identity of reporters or testimonials issued by their companies and may wear easily recognisable clothing and armbands for easy identification by police officers at the scene.

We believe that real professional journalists will not engage in illegal acts while reporting. We also hope that journalists would identify the people around them to discern whether they are really reporting. This could help prevent people, disguised as journalists, from engaging in acts with ulterior motives. If anyone comes across suspected fake journalists, they may inform the Police's Media Liaison Team for follow-up, which include checking the work passes issued to these journalists by their organisations and asking them to leave the front-line reporting area.

(3) Press freedom is Hong Kong's core value protected by the Basic Law and is the fundamental right enjoyed by the people of Hong Kong. The Government is firmly committed to safeguarding and respecting press freedom, and providing a suitable environment in which the media industry could exert its function as the fourth estate.

As to the suggestion of establishing an official organisation responsible for issuing press identification, the Chief Executive already responded at the media session on October 19, 2019. Respecting the freedom of press, the Government has no intention or plan to establish an official organisation to issue press identification.

The Government, as always, will continue to safeguard press freedom, facilitate media reporting and uphold the core value of Hong Kong.

[LCQ17: Assisting first-time home buyers](#)

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr James Lau, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

The Chief Executive has indicated in this year's Policy Address that, in order to assist first-time home buyers, the Government would immediately raise the caps on the value of the properties under the Mortgage Insurance Programme of the HKMC Insurance Limited. The maximum value of properties, eligible for insurance coverage for mortgage loans with 90 per cent loan-to-value ratio borrowed by first-time home buyers, was raised from \$4 million to \$8 million. On the other hand, it is learnt that a professional investor, who is also a member of a committee under the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC), has called for the abolition of the MPF system given his projection that one-third of the returns from the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) accounts of members of the public will go into the pockets of fund managers. On assisting first-time home buyers, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as some members of the property agency trade have pointed out that following the implementation of the aforesaid measure, property prices have rebounded, ending a four-month downward trend, with the transaction prices of some properties even rising by almost 20 per cent, whether the Government has assessed if the aforesaid measure has created the effect that first-time home buyers have to pay more for down payments and mortgage payments; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, whether it will consider,

through other policies, assisting first-time home buyers in making good use of their personal assets to meet the relevant expenses;

(2) as quite a number of members of the public have indicated that they are unable to purchase their own homes as they cannot afford the substantial down payments to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars, whether the Government will, from the perspectives of protecting the MPF accumulated contributions of members of the public from being nibbled away by fund managers, allowing members of the public to make good use of their personal assets, and alleviating the pressure to be borne by members of the public in purchasing their first homes, consider afresh my suggestion of allowing first-time home buyers to use their MPF accumulated contributions to pay for down payments and the relevant expenses; if not, of the reasons for that;

(3) whether it has studied if the pressing housing problem can be effectively alleviated by allowing first-time home buyers to use their MPF accumulated contributions for home purchases; if it has studied and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the details; if it has not, whether it will conduct such a study and seek the views of the public; and

(4) having regard to the comments that the practice of the Government in compelling members of the public to make MPF contributions for decades, in the clear knowledge that they are being exploited by fund managers, is tantamount to forcing members of the public to "accept discounted salary payments each month" and to "keep making contributions which have no prospect of recovery of losses", which has not only undermined the ability of members of the public in purchasing their first homes, but also resulted in the continuous accumulation of public grievances and public anger, thereby eroding the public's confidence in the Government's implementation of policies, and the former Central Policy Unit even anticipated that a governance crisis similar to "Occupy Central by the elderly" may emerge as a result, whether the Government will seriously review the views and suggestions put forward by members of the public and the aforesaid SFC member by exploring every possible means to compensate members of the public for the MPF accumulated contributions that have been nibbled away by fund managers, or examining the abolition of the MPF system directly?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Transport and Housing Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) The latest amendments to the Mortgage Insurance Programme (MIP) aim at providing more commensurate support to first-time homebuyers, or people wishing to upgrade their homes, who have sufficient repayment abilities but cannot afford the down payment. While the applicable property value caps of the MIP have been adjusted, borrowers are still required to meet a host of specific eligibility criteria for the MIP applications, including meeting a 50 per cent debt-to-income ratio and paying extra premium for risk mitigation

purpose. For applicants with mortgage loans exceeding a loan-to-value ratio of 80 per cent, the HKMC Insurance Limited (HKMCI) has imposed additional eligibility criteria, including that borrowers must be first-time homebuyers and regularly salaried.

Fluctuations in the property market are affected by many factors. The Government has time and again reminded potential homebuyers to carefully consider their needs and repayment ability before making a decision on buying a property. The HKMCI will closely monitor the property market condition and evaluate the effectiveness of the MIP in due course.

In assisting home purchase by the public, the Government has spared no effort in increasing public housing supply and building a housing ladder. Aside from launching the Home Ownership Scheme, Green Form Subsidised Home Ownership Scheme and White Form Secondary Market Scheme, etc. to meet the home ownership aspirations of the community (including first-time homebuyers), the Government has also launched the Starter Homes (SH) pilot project targetting Hong Kong residents with higher income who have never owned any residential property in Hong Kong. The first SH pilot project was launched last year and received positive response in the community. In view of this, it was announced in the "The Chief Executive's 2019 Policy Address" that the Government would put up a site on Anderson Road in Kwun Tong for sale in the first quarter of 2020 for the second SH pilot project. In addition to building private housing units, the developer will be required under land sale conditions to offer approximately 1 000 SH units for sale at below-market prices to eligible applicants specified by the Government.

(2) and (3) The objective of the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) System is to require the working population to save part of their income for meeting basic retirement needs in the future. Therefore, MPF accrued benefits should be kept in the System as far as possible and should only be withdrawn to meet retirement needs.

Regarding the suggestion to allow withdrawal of MPF for the purpose of home purchase, there have been diverse views in the community, including quite a number of objections and reservations. The Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority (MPFA) has reviewed relevant arrangements in other jurisdictions. Compared with other places, the MPF contribution rate is relatively low in Hong Kong. The low MPF contribution rate is intended to allow flexibility for scheme members to freely use their remaining income to meet their other needs. Allowing scheme members to withdraw MPF for home purchase will greatly reduce the MPF protection available to them upon retirement. The objective of the MPF is to accumulate wealth through long-term and regular mandatory investments with the benefit of cost averaging. As a matter of fact, as at December 2018, the average accrued benefits of MPF members was only \$186,000. Therefore, the actual effect of early withdrawal of part of their accrued benefits for helping home purchase is limited. Furthermore, the risk of investing in real estate is much higher than that of MPF funds. If the accrued benefits are used as a lump sum for down payment, when property price drops and property owners become unable to repay their mortgages, scheme members will lose their retirement savings or even run into

more debts, which goes against the original objective of the MPF System.

(4) The MPF System has been in place for almost 19 years since its inception on December 1, 2000. Its operation has become more mature and its assets have grown continuously. As at September 2019, total MPF accumulated assets for scheme members amounted to \$905 billion. Investment returns accounted for \$237.1 billion, net of fees and expenses, or over one-fourth of the total MPF assets. The annualised rate of return since the inception of the MPF System is 3.6 per cent, exceeding the corresponding inflation rate of 1.9 per cent over the same period. Over the years, the MPFA has initiated different measures to drive down MPF fees. The Fund Expense Ratio of MPF funds has dropped from 2.1 per cent in December 2007 to the current rate of 1.5 per cent, representing a reduction of almost 30 per cent.

Apparently, the MPF as a retirement savings channel for the general public has its merits. The Government will work with the MPFA to continuously refine and enhance the MPF System, such as through the establishment of an eMPF Platform and the review of the fee cap of the Default Investment Strategy. We will continue to improve the operating efficiency of MPF schemes and lower fee levels for the benefit of scheme members.