

LCQ9: Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund

Following is a question by the Hon Wong Kwok-kin and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (April 21):

Question:

With the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic having dealt a heavy blow to Hong Kong's economy, and the Government no longer providing employers with wage subsidies through the Employment Support Scheme since December last year, the unemployment rate has continued to rise in recent months. Some representatives of trade unions have anticipated that there will be a sharp increase in the number of applications for ex gratia payments made to the Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund (the Fund) by those employees who have been owed (i) wages, (ii) pay for untaken annual leave and statutory holidays, (iii) wages in lieu of notice and (iv) severance payments. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective monthly numbers of applications for ex gratia payments (i) received, (ii) being processed and (iii) approved, as well as the balance of the Fund at the end of each month, in the past three years;
- (2) of (i) the average and (ii) the longest durations between the time when employees submitted applications for ex gratia payments to the Labour Department (LD) and the time when payments were disbursed to them, in each of the past three years; whether the special work arrangements implemented by the Government last year due to the epidemic lengthened the time needed for processing such applications;
- (3) in respect of the applications for each of the aforesaid four types of ex gratia payments, of the average amount of payment applied for in such applications, and the number of such applications in which the amount of payment applied for was the relevant ceiling, in each of the past three years;
- (4) whether it will consider publishing on the LD's website, on a monthly or quarterly basis, the updated monthly information on the Fund (including the aforesaid statistics);
- (5) given that the Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund Board is conducting a review on the scope of protection of the Fund, of the progress and outcome of the review; as the ceilings for the aforesaid four types of ex gratia payments have not been adjusted for years, whether the Government will propose to the Board that the ceilings be raised, e.g. raising the ceiling for ex gratia payment for wages in arrears from the existing \$36,000 to \$76,000, which is equivalent to four months' wages for an employee with the median monthly employment earning (i.e. \$19,000) in the second quarter of

last year; and

(6) whether the LD will adopt measures to expedite the processing of applications for ex gratia payments, or extend the time limit for making such applications?

Reply:

President,

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

(1) From 2018 to 2020, the number of applications received by the Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund (the Fund) in each month is set out at Annex 1. During the same period, the number of applications processed, the number of applications with ex gratia payment approved, and the accumulated surplus of the Fund are set out at Annex 2.

(2) Upon receipt of applications to the Fund from employees, the Labour Department (LD) will kick off the procedures of handling such applications immediately, which include liaising with employers, provisional liquidators/liquidators, trustees of Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) schemes, the Legal Aid Department, and, where necessary, requesting the applicants to provide further information, etc., for the purpose of collecting the necessary information and documents for verifying the applications and making ex gratia payment. Ex gratia payment could only be granted to qualified applicants after the LD has received all the relevant information and documents required for processing the applications. Yet whether the information and documents are adequate is often beyond the control of the LD (for example, it takes a longer time for individual employers or liquidators to compile the employment records of employees, individual employees are unable to promptly furnish information to support their applications, etc.). As such, the LD does not keep information on the durations between the time when the LD receives an application from an employee and the time when the Fund effects ex gratia payment to the employee concerned. Instead, the LD keeps information on the time required to effect payment upon receipt of all information and documents required for processing the applications. From 2018 to 2020, the average time and the longest time required to effect payment upon receipt of all information and documents required for processing the applications by the LD are set out at Annex 3. The average time and the longest time required to effect payment in 2020 were similar to those of the previous two years.

(3) From 2018 to 2020, the average claim amounts per application and the number of applications reaching the upper limits of the ex gratia payment with a breakdown by payment items of the Fund are set out at Annex 4.

(4) The Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund Board (the Board) compiles its annual report in each financial year showing the details of the operation of the Fund and its key statistics, including the number of applications received and approved as well as the financial position of the Fund, etc. In addition, the number of applications received and processed by the Fund and

the amount of ex gratia payment granted each year are set out in the LD's annual report. The annual reports of the Board and LD are uploaded to the LD's website to facilitate public access. These annual statistics and information can reflect the Fund's operation in a complete and holistic manner.

(5) Based on the information and data gathered, the Board conducts a review of the scope of coverage of all the payment items under the Fund. The Board has to conduct careful deliberation for holistic consideration, including the legislative proposal to be made by the Government to abolish the arrangement for "offsetting" severance payment/long service payment with the MPF contributions which may bring substantial impact on the operation and financial position of the Fund. When the Board completes the review, the Government will consult the Labour Advisory Board and report to the Panel on Manpower of the Legislative Council on the outcome of the review.

(6) Upon receipt of the applications to the Fund, the LD will examine the information and documents of every application carefully and conduct verification prudently. It is targeted to issue ex gratia payment to qualified applicants within 10 weeks upon receipt of all relevant information and documents required for processing the applications. The LD reviews the procedures of verification of applications from time to time with a view to issuing ex gratia payment as soon as practicable.

Employees who are owed wages or other statutory entitlements by their employers should file their claims as soon as possible. At present, an employee should apply to the Fund within six months upon the termination of employment contract. Extending the time limit for submission of application may render it difficult to verify the application when employment records and other information are incomplete.

LCQ22: Developing public housing on brownfield sites

Following is a question by the Hon Alice Mak and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (April 21):

Question:

In its Study on Existing Profile and Operations of Brownfield Sites in the New Territories published in November 2019, the Planning Department (PlanD) indicated that 450 hectares (ha) of scattered brownfield sites might have relatively higher possible development potential in view of their proximity to existing new towns and major highways as well as their relatively large size. The PlanD completed early last year the review of

about 160 hectares (ha) of such brownfield sites which were closer to the existing infrastructure, and shortlisted eight brownfield clusters suitable for public housing development. Relevant engineering feasibility studies have commenced. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the following details of the various brownfield clusters:

- (i) the areas and distribution of the various sites, broken down by the uses thereof,
- (ii) the number of lots occupied by existing operators, and their lot numbers and site areas, and
- (iii) the current numbers of residential units and residents;

(2) of the following details expected of the various brownfield clusters upon completion of public housing development:

- (i) the areas and distribution of the various sites, broken down by the uses thereof (including housing, community facilities and roads),
- (ii) the number of residential units and the plot ratios of the sites concerned, and
- (iii) the carrying capacity of nearby transport systems, including the traffic capacities of trunk roads and public transport interchanges; and

(3) whether it has drawn up a timetable for carrying out the following work for the various brownfield clusters:

- (i) the various processes involved in turning "non-spade-ready" sites into "spade-ready" sites (including engineering feasibility studies, detailed design, rezoning, land resumption, clearance, land decontamination and site formation works, and handover of the sites to the Housing Department), and
- (ii) expounding the compensation and rehousing arrangements to the affected residents and operators?

Reply:

President,

The reply to the various parts of Hon Alice Mak's question is as follows:

(1) Of the 450 hectares (ha) of brownfield sites with no development plans but may have higher possible development potential, the Planning Department (PlanD) completed the first-phase review of 160 ha of brownfield sites closer to the existing infrastructure in 2019 (Note 1), and promulgated eight shortlisted clusters in Yuen Long, Tuen Mun and Tai Po suitable for higher density public housing development in the short to medium term (details are set out in LC Paper No. CB(1)463/19-20(01) (Note 2)). The locations and study areas of these brownfield clusters are at Annex. The PlanD has uploaded the study area and site plan of each cluster onto its website (Note 3).

According to the findings of the "Study on Existing Profile and Operations of Brownfield Sites in the New Territories", it is estimated that these eight clusters covering 36 ha of brownfield sites may involve approximately 230 operations, which mainly include general warehouse and storage, as well as facilities related to the logistics and construction

industries. In addition, should the public housing development projects be implemented, removal of structures scattering across the shortlisted brownfield clusters (possibly including a small number of temporary domestic structures) may be unavoidable for optimising land development.

Upon completion of the engineering feasibility study (EFS) for each shortlisted brownfield cluster and confirmation of the feasibility of the proposed public housing development projects and the development parameters, the Government would initiate the procedures for rezoning, detailed design and land resumption accordingly. Detailed information about the lots being occupied by the operators, and the numbers of households and residents involved would be available after the completion of freezing surveys by the Lands Department.

(2) The Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD) has progressively commenced EFSs for these eight brownfield clusters from June 2020 onwards. The EFSs will explore the feasibility and development parameters of public housing developments, review and recommend the required upgrading of infrastructural facilities such as transport, drainage, sewerage, water supply, etc. The EFSs are expected to be completed successively in around 2022. The CEDD will, having regard to the needs of the planned population, recommend the provision for Government, institution or community facilities, open space and commercial facilities in consultation with relevant departments and with reference to the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines. Any possible impacts arising from the proposed public housing developments on the adjacent roads and the improvement measures so required would be established upon the completion of the traffic and transport impact assessments for each brownfield cluster.

Subject to the findings of the EFSs, it is roughly estimated at this stage that the eight brownfield clusters may produce over 20 000 public housing units. This estimation is based on the maximum domestic plot ratio of 3.6 for rural areas as set out in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines. In view of the shortage of public housing supply, we are further exploring under the EFSs the feasibility to raise the domestic plot ratio with a view to increasing the supply of housing units by taking into full consideration various development constraints (such as the capacity of transport infrastructure). The actual development parameters are subject to the findings of the EFSs.

(3) For these eight brownfield clusters, at this stage, we expect to transform them into "spade-ready sites" through completing EFSs, detailed design, rezoning, land resumption, clearance, land decontamination and site formation works, and hand over the sites to the relevant authority for construction of public housing in about six years to increase the supply in the short to medium term.

Relevant compensation and rehousing arrangements for affected households and brownfield operators will be provided in accordance with the enhanced ex-gratia measures announced in May 2018. Our plan is to explain the compensation and rehousing arrangements to all relevant parties after the freezing surveys.

Note 1: The second-phase review of the remaining 290 ha of brownfield sites was also completed. Details are set out in LC Paper No. CB(1)756/20-21(01) (www.legco.gov.hk/yr20-21/english/panels/dev/papers/devcb1-756-1-e.pdf).

Note 2: The hyperlink is as follows:

www.legco.gov.hk/yr19-20/english/panels/dev/papers/devcb1-463-1-e.pdf.

Note 3: The hyperlink is as follows:

www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/comp_s/Brownfield/Report/Shortlisted%20Brownfield%20Clusters_2020.pdf.

LCQ15: Installation of village lights in the rural areas

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Che-cheung and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (April 21):

Question:

Some residents in the rural areas of Yuen Long have relayed that a road section near their residences, which is about one kilometre long and used by both pedestrians and vehicles, was opened five years ago, but has not yet been installed with village lights so far. As the road section is extremely dark at night, accidents of vehicles bumping into objects on the roadsides have occurred from time to time, the rescue work of ambulances has been affected, and residents walking on the road section have their hearts in their mouths as they are worried about stepping on snakes. They have applied for the installation of village lights, but the District Office in the district has advised that their application needs to wait for at least six years before it will be processed. Regarding the installation of village lights, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of (i) the number of applications for the installation of village lights received, (ii) the number of applications in respect of which the installation works of village lights had yet to be completed, (iii) the quota on village lights to be installed, and (iv) the number of village lights installed and the number of applications involved, in each of the past four years, with a breakdown by District Council district;

(2) of the total number of unlit road sections of 500 metres or above in length which were involved in the applications for the installation of village lights currently on the waiting list;

(3) whether it will, when planning new rural roads, ensure that the installation of village lights will be completed in tandem with the

construction of roads; if not, of the reasons for that; and

(4) whether it will expedite the installation of village lights, so as to clear the backlog of applications expeditiously; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Under the current practice, the Highways Department (HyD) will determine an overall quota on a territory-wide basis for the Village Lighting Programme (VLP) based on its resources every year, and carry out works to install new village lights for rural roads in need or to relocate existing village lights to cater for the needs of land development. Applications for installation of village lights from various districts are received, coordinated and prioritised mainly based on the date of application by the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and various District Offices (DOs). They will then be incorporated into the VLP for implementation by the HyD. The HAD will allocate quota to districts in proportion to the total number of applications received from each district.

Before the commencement of the village light installation works, the HyD and the HAD will carry out a series of preparation and follow-up work, including arranging site meetings with village representatives, applicants and relevant departments. If the application involves private land, consent from the land owner would need to be obtained.

Having consulted the HAD and the HyD, my reply to the various parts of the Hon Leung Che-cheung's question is as follows:

(1) Based on the information provided by HAD, the number of applications for the installation of village lights received and the quota on village lights to be installed in various districts in the New Territories from financial year 2017-18 to 2020-21 are set out at Annex 1.

Based on the information provided by HyD, the number of village lights installed and the number of village lights being installed/under planning in various districts in the New Territories from financial year 2017-18 to 2020-21 are set out at Annex 2.

(2) In the course of processing applications for the installation of village lights, the relevant departments will invite the applicant and village representatives concerned to meet at the site under application for installation of village lights so as to jointly draw up the number and the specific location of village lights to be installed. The Government does not maintain the relevant information requested.

(3) Generally speaking, in implementing any new road works, the works departments will design and install road lights in accordance with the Public Lighting Design Manual published by the HyD. The aim is to ensure sufficient public lighting facilities upon the commissioning of the road section concerned.

(4) In the course of processing applications for the installation of village lights, the HyD needs to discuss the location of installation or the routing of cables with the applicants. It may take a longer time to handle cases where the proposed village light or associated cables is located within private land, there is a need to handle objections, or stakeholders such as the applicant and village representatives cannot reach a consensus on the location of the village light or associated cables.

In recent years, the HyD, the HAD and DOs have allocated additional resources and adopted measures to expedite the handling of applications for installation of village lights. For the village lighting applications already incorporated into the VLP, the HAD and the HyD will regularly review the applications and consider whether to remove the cases that remain unresolved for a long time due to various reasons, such as lighting location subject to objections or site constraints, to spare resources for processing the remaining applications. Under the current practice, DOs will inform the applicants of the removal of their applications. The HAD and the HyD also hold regular meetings to review the progress of follow-up actions and examine individual special cases.

Moreover, subject to availability of resources, the HyD and DOs will initiate preliminary work such as site inspection and identification of location for applications yet to be incorporated into the VLP, so as to commence the installation works as soon as possible once these applications are formally incorporated into the VLP.

HKPL marks World Book Day by inviting public to explore new reading frontiers (with photos)

To tie in with World Book Day, the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL) of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has launched a range of exciting activities from today (April 21). Built on last year's concept "Discover and Share the Joy of Reading – Unlock the Secrets@LIBRARY", the new theme "Exploring the New Frontiers of Reading" is introduced this year to help readers broaden and deepen the scope of their reading.

In the video programme "Interaction with Authors@LIBRARY", writers will exchange with librarians the benefits of extensive reading, as well as promoting quality books of different subjects from "Librarians' Choice" to help readers broaden and deepen the scope of their reading. They will also share with readers the services and vast collections of the Hong Kong Central Library (HKCL), as well as making known in advance a series of celebration activities for the 20th anniversary of the HKCL.

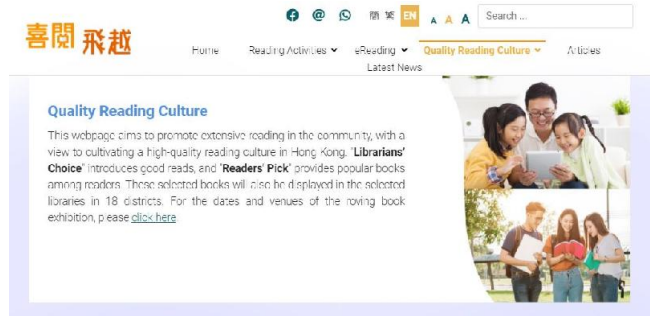
In addition, the HKPL is rolling out a "Quality Reading Culture" webpage (readingisjoyful.gov.hk/en/quality-reading-culture) and roving exhibition to further promote extensive reading in the community starting from this month. The webpage, which will be updated quarterly, introduces books according to different subjects, with "Librarians' Choice" introducing good reads, and "Readers' Pick" providing popular books of readers. Roving exhibitions introducing good books will also be held at designated public libraries.

From April 23 onwards, the HKPL will upload videos on "Fun Reading at Hong Kong Historic Buildings" to LCSD's Edutainment Channel (www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/edutainment-channel.html) in phases. The video series will lead parents and children to visit the revitalised historic buildings, including the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups Leadership Institute, Hong Kong Observatory, Haw Par Music and those along the Ping Shan Heritage Trail. They will be able to appreciate the features of these historic buildings while listening to selected thematic stories.

The HKPL organises the 4.23 World Book Day Creative Competition annually to encourage children and youth to broaden their scope of reading. Featuring the theme "Exploring the New Frontiers of Reading", this year's competition received an overwhelming response, with over 1 100 entries from more than 210 schools. Winning entries were selected from each category, with 25 chosen from junior primary, 15 from senior primary Chinese, 15 from junior secondary Chinese, 12 from senior secondary Chinese, nine from senior primary English, eight from junior secondary English, and five from senior secondary English. Results of the winning entries have been uploaded to www.hkpl.gov.hk/wbd. Some winners have also been invited to share how they fell in love with reading and their tips on selecting and reading books through the video series, "Good Tips on Falling in Love with Reading".

In addition, the "Take a Break – eReading Corner" will select 30 e-books from two popular online Chinese collections, HyRead and SUEP, each month from today to June 21. Readers can visit the HKPL's website or simply download the HyRead 3 App and log in with their library accounts to borrow the selected e-books without making a reservation and a fee.

Details of the activities are available on the HKPL's "Reading is Joyful" thematic website (readingisjoyful.gov.hk/423wbd), "Reading is Joyful" Facebook page (www.facebook.com/readingisjoyful) and Instagram page (www.instagram.com/readingisjoyful).



US Dollar Liquidity Facility tender result

The following is issued on behalf of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

US Dollar Liquidity Facility tender result:

Tender date	:	April 21, 2021 (Wednesday)
Settlement date	:	April 22, 2021 (Thursday)
Repayment date	:	April 29, 2021 (Thursday)
Tenor	:	Seven Days
Amount applied	:	Nil
Amount allotted	:	Nil
Lowest interest rate accepted	:	Nil
Highest interest rate accepted	:	Ni