

LCQ13: Members of public flocking to countryside amid epidemic

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

Some residents in the New Territories have relayed that since the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the number of visitors to the countryside such as country parks has been increasing incessantly, giving rise to public health and hygiene problems such as the spread of the epidemic disease and the accumulation of rubbish left by visitors. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that a large number of countryside visitors gather from time to time in the countryside for recreation and amenity, increasing the risk of spreading the epidemic disease, whether the relevant Government departments will step up management and law enforcement in such places; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that the authorities have reduced the numbers of rubbish bins and recycling bins in the country parks in recent years to encourage visitors to "take their litter home with them", whether the authorities have reviewed if such arrangement has aggravated the haphazard disposal of rubbish by visitors in the country parks; whether the authorities will adjust such arrangement during the epidemic; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether the authorities have communicated with the rural committees and local organisations in various districts to explore ways of tackling the aforesaid public health and hygiene problems; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether the authorities will step up promotional efforts through the media and social platforms to advise members of the public to avoid flocking to the countryside during the epidemic, and of the matters requiring their special attention when engaging in activities in such areas; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government notices that there have been a considerable number of members of the public visiting country parks and other countryside areas since the epidemic broke out last year. Relevant Government departments have stepped up patrol in country parks and other hiking hotspots and have taken

measures to strengthen publicity and law enforcement.

Having consulted the relevant departments, the Government's reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Lo is as follows:

(1) For a more effective suppression of the spreading of the virus, the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) (Control of Disease Regulation) prohibits group gathering of more than a specified number of persons (Note) in public places (including country parks). To appeal to the understanding of the visitors of the importance of observing the regulation, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has displayed large-scale banners, posters and notices at locations in country parks where crowds may gather from time to time. The department also flexibly deploys staff to strengthen site inspections, cleaning and enforcement in order to maintain the cleanliness of country parks. Publicity ambassadors are employed to remind visitors to pay attention to personal and environmental hygiene, maintain appropriate social distancing and wear facial masks, etc. at hiking hotspots.

In addition, the barbecue sites and campsites in country parks have been closed from March 28 to May 20, 2020 and from July 15, 2020 up to now (until further notice). During the closure of the above facilities, no one can carry out barbecuing or camping activities in country parks for the sake of reducing social contact of the public as much as possible.

Last year, the AFCD conducted over 60 000 inspections for enforcing the regulation on group gathering under the Control of Disease Regulation and the prohibition of camping and barbecuing activities under the Country Parks and Special Areas Regulations (Cap. 208A). Enforcement actions have been taken against over 700 persons for contravening the relevant anti-epidemic measures. The AFCD will closely monitor the situation in country parks and take necessary actions to strengthen publicity and enforcement.

(2) The AFCD has been running the "take your litter home" public education programme since 2015 with the support of green groups and hiking groups. The programme aims to encourage public participation in the protection of the countryside environment by encouraging them to build up the good habits of taking away their litter after visiting the country parks. To tie in with the relevant public education programme, litter bins and recycling bins along the hiking trails were removed by end of 2017 while there are still litter collection facilities at recreational sites (e.g. barbecue sites and campsites) for visitor use if needed. When patrolling the country parks, the AFCD staff would remind visitors to take away their litter and take appropriate enforcement actions against littering if detected.

Although all barbecue sites and campsites in country parks are temporarily closed during the epidemic, in view of the increased number of visitors recently, the AFCD has adjusted the cordoned off area as needed to ensure that country park visitors could continue to use the litter collection facilities in some recreation sites for maintaining environmental hygiene. As regards littering problem on hiking trails outside country parks, the

relevant departments will take appropriate follow-up actions.

To minimise the impact brought by the increase in visitors to the countryside environment, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) implemented the Green Hiking Etiquette Campaign from September to November last year. With joint efforts with local non-profit-making organisations (NPOs), over a dozen of green ambassadors were employed to promote the concept of "Leave No Trace at Mountain and Sea", such as "take your litter home", "bring own bottle to reduce single-use plastic consumables", "proper disposal of masks", etc. to the general public at popular hiking spots during the weekends.

(3) Regarding the public hygiene issues of the rural area, the departments concerned will, subject to the circumstances and as necessary, contact the relevant Rural Committees (RCs) or village representatives (VRs) direct for follow-up from time to time. District Offices of the New Territories (DOs) liaise closely with the VRs and RCs in respect of rural matters. As for the anti-epidemic work in the rural areas, DOs have arranged cleaning and distribution of anti-epidemic supplies for those areas having regard to the situation.

The AFCD has also been liaising with relevant district organisations from time to time with a view to improving the management and anti-epidemic work in country parks. Taking Tai Tong, Tai Lam Country Park as an example, the AFCD discussed with several Government departments and other relevant local organisations in October last year on the necessary management work for the peak season of the red leaves appreciation. The department deployed more staff accordingly to the Tai Tong area to publicise the anti-epidemic regulations and measures and stepped up cleaning in that area.

(4) The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health has been reminding citizens to be aware of personal and environmental hygiene through various channels, including thematic websites, Announcements in the Public Interest on television and radio stations, guidelines, leaflets and posters. The CHP also sends out health messages on personal and environmental hygiene through various publicity and health education channels such as websites, Facebook page, YouTube channel, television, radio, health education infoline, publications and media interviews, etc. The CHP will continue to maintain close liaison with different stakeholders through various platforms and keep them informed of the latest epidemic situation and preventive measures. Health-related messages will continue to be distributed to different groups through their collaboration and support.

The AFCD continues to carry out publicity to countryside visitors through various channels, including the display of promotional banners and posters at suitable locations of country parks and appeal to visitors through social media and radio programmes to maintain environmental hygiene, avoid crowded places during the peak time in planning visits, and pay attention to anti-epidemic regulations and measures at countryside. Advertisements are placed on public transport and media with messages such as "take your litter home". Various relevant social platforms of the Secretary for the Environment

and the Environment Bureau, such as "Clean Shorelines", "Big Waster" and "Environmental Campaign Committee", as well as those of the NPOs working with the EPD in promoting the Green Hiking Etiquette Campaign, have also worked together to promote the relevant messages with multi-channels.

Note: The number of specified persons will be adjusted depending on the development of the epidemic situation.

LCQ9: Quality of drinking water in public rental housing estates

â€‹Following is a question by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

There have been instances from time to time in which residents of public rental housing (PRH) estates found impurities or contaminants in drinking water. For example, some residents of Po Lam Estate in Tseung Kwan O found black precipitates in drinking water in December last year. The residents concerned have relayed that upon receipt of reports of such incidents, the authorities generally only took interim measures (e.g. deploying water wagons for supplying water to the affected residents) without fundamentally solving the problem of alleged contamination of drinking water. Quite a number of residents of PRH estates are worried that consumption of problematic drinking water over a long period of time will expose them to health hazards. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of reports received by the authorities in each of the past three years concerning problems with drinking water in PRH estates; (i) the district, (ii) the name of the estate, (iii) the age of the building, and (iv) the respective numbers of units and residents involved in each incident; in respect of each incident, the numbers of days and times for which water wagons were deployed for temporary water supply, the time taken for conducting tests and investigations and the results thereof (including the impurities contained in drinking water and the causes for such a situation), as well as the corresponding and follow-up measures taken;

(2) whether it will conduct a comprehensive inspection of the fresh water supply systems in all PRH estates; if so, of the specific timetable, as well as the financial and manpower resources needed; if not, the reasons for that, and what new measures the authorities will take to prevent drinking water problems from occurring in PRH estates; and

(3) whether, in order to strengthen the confidence of residents of PRH

estates in drinking water safety, the authorities will conduct drinking water sampling tests for PRH estates on a regular basis, and comprehensively review the construction of the fresh water supply systems for public housing (including the materials, works implementation procedures and specifications); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Development Bureau, my reply to the question raised by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan is as follows:

(1) In the past three years, there were two incidents involving deposits or impurities found in fresh water in public rental housing (PRH) estates under the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) which were related to the public fresh water supply network. Details of these incidents are set out at Annex. When an incident regarding suspected contamination or impurities in fresh water occurred or comes to our attention, staff of the HA's estate offices will immediately check the internal plumbing systems in accordance with the Housing Department's guidelines and liaise with the Water Supplies Department (WSD) to follow up on the water quality situation where necessary with a view to relieving concerns of the residents.

(2) The WSD launched the Water Safety Plan for Buildings (WSPB) in 2017, which adopts a risk-based, multiple-barrier approach that helps property owners and property management agents manage the internal plumbing systems of buildings effectively through risk assessment; implementation and monitoring of appropriate control measures; and regular auditing. The objective is to safeguard drinking water quality in the buildings in the long term. The implementation of the WSPB can help property owners and property management agents identify the potential risks early, so as to take appropriate follow-up action with a view to ensuring the drinking water safety.

The HA has all along attached importance to the water safety of its buildings and participated in the WSPB for the PRH estates in stages since the fourth quarter of 2018. Relevant work is estimated to complete fully in 2022-23.

(3) The WSD regularly monitors the drinking water quality in order to ensure the safety of the drinking water supplied. Apart from water treatment works, service reservoirs, connection points at the public fresh water supply network, the scope of monitoring includes random collection of water samples from publicly accessible consumers' taps (including but not limited to those in the management offices and markets of PRH estates, etc.) from the territory for testing. When there is any irregularity in the water sample, e.g. deposits or impurities found in the water, the WSD will take further investigation and follow-up actions with the property owner and property management agent.

The HA also complies with the Waterworks Ordinance and the WSD's Circular Letters, and has participated in the WSD's Enhanced Water Quality

Monitoring Programme across the territory since 2017, under which the WSD tests water samples collected from the randomly selected drinking water consumers' taps, in order to further monitor the drinking water safety of PRH estates.

For newly-constructed PRH estates, the HA set up the Review Committee on Quality Assurance Issues Relating to Fresh Water Supply of Public Housing Estates (Review Committee) in 2015 to carry out comprehensive review of the quality of the fresh water supply in new public housing. The HA has fully implemented the enhancement measures recommended by the Review Committee, ranging from contract specifications, delivery and verification of materials, monitoring during construction to testing upon completion, etc. These measures have strengthened the monitoring of contractors and sub-contractors as well as the control and checking of construction materials, including soldering materials. The HA also complies with relevant regulations in the Waterworks Ordinance on the use of materials and the related procedures in all new public housing developments.

LCQ6: Combating illegal fishing in Hong Kong

â€‹Following is a question by the Hon Steven Ho and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

Some local fishermen have complained that some people have been engaging in illegal fishing within Hong Kong waters from time to time in recent years. Such people use means forbidden in Hong Kong to catch fish, which has not only caused destruction to Hong Kong's fisheries resources and marine ecosystem as well as affected local fishermen's livelihood, but also rendered Hong Kong's legislation on trawl ban, limitation on the number of fishing vessels, protection of marine parks, etc. virtually non-existent. Those fishermen have pointed out that government departments' perfunctory law enforcement and inability to enforce the law across the boundary have resulted in the problem of illegal fishing becoming increasingly rampant. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) as I have learnt that it is difficult to identify the vessels engaged in illegal fishing because their licence numbers are covered, whether the Government will explore other means (e.g. using paintballs) and apply new technologies to enhance the efficiency in law enforcement;
- (2) whether it has plans to conduct joint law enforcement operations with

Mainland authorities to combat illegal fishing; if so, of the details of and the difficulties involved in such law enforcement operations; whether it will set up a notification mechanism on cross-boundary illegal fishing activities with Mainland authorities; and

(3) whether it has assessed if the current legislation and law enforcement efforts can effectively combat cross-boundary illegal fishing activities; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the justifications; if the assessment outcome is in the negative, whether the Government will amend the law to raise the relevant penalties and allocate additional resources to step up law enforcement efforts?

Reply:

President,

According to the Fisheries Protection Ordinance (the Ordinance), the use of unregistered vessels, either local or non-local, for fishing activities as well as the use of fishing gear prohibited by the Fisheries Protection Regulations (the Regulations) are considered as illegal fishing activities. The Regulations prohibit the use of explosive, toxic substance, electrical and trawling devices, etc. for the purpose of fishing.

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is committed to combating illegal fishing activities. A dedicated enforcement team carries out patrols against illegal fishing activities at irregular hours (including the small hours) in the blackspots of illegal fishing in Hong Kong waters. The AFCD will, based on the information and intelligence gathered from patrols, exercise flexible deployment of resources and conducts joint enforcement operations with the Marine Police. Last year, the AFCD conducted over 1 530 patrols and conducted 55 joint operations with the Marine Police, with 14 cases successfully prosecuted and 44 persons prosecuted and convicted in total.

The AFCD has encountered many challenges in conducting enforcement operations against illegal fishing activities in recent years. Most vessels engaging in illegal fishing would not stop for inspection according to the instructions or warnings of law enforcement officers, and would swiftly leave Hong Kong waters. The licence number of these vessels would also be covered, making it difficult for enforcement officers to follow up and investigate. Stopping trawlers at sea was also difficult as law enforcement operations under unstable sea conditions involve substantial resources and certain risks.

The reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Steven Ho is as follows:

(1) The AFCD will apply technologies, such as real-time satellite data, to acquire information on vessels which cover their licences and refuse to stop for inspection as instructed for follow-up investigation and tracking. Real-time satellite data can also help identify the locations and number of

suspicious vessels so that resources can be deployed more effectively to combat activities at illegal fishing blackspots in a targeted manner and enhance the efficiency of enforcement actions at sea. In addition, the AFCD conducts joint operations with the Marine Police and uses "vessel arrest systems" to intercept suspicious vessels which refuse to stop as and when appropriate, allowing enforcement officers to collect evidence on board and enhancing the effectiveness of their actions.

(2) Under the framework agreement on Hong Kong/Guangdong co-operation in agricultural matters, a notification mechanism is established between Hong Kong and Guangdong to combat illegal fishing and cross-boundary fishing activities. The AFCD has been exchanging intelligence and organising joint enforcement operations with the Guangdong Provincial Marine Comprehensive Law Enforcement General Brigade (the General Brigade).

In the joint enforcement operations, the AFCD requests that vessels engaged in illegal fishing in Hong Kong waters would be intercepted by the General Brigade along the boundary as they return to Mainland waters, so that the AFCD would be able to investigate. Joint enforcement operations at sea continue to face challenges, such as the failure of communication networks to fully cover all boundary waters. It is also not easy for both parties to locate illegal fishing vessels precisely at sea, especially under inclement weather and low visibility conditions. In this regard, both parties continue to explore ways to improve communication and jointly formulate action plans in order to improve operational efficiency.

In addition, the AFCD will refer the information on Mainland fishing vessels found engaging in illegal fishing in Hong Kong waters during patrols to the General Brigade regularly through the notification mechanism for their follow-up investigations and assistance to prevent Mainland fishermen from entering the Hong Kong waters for fishing so as to tackle the problem at source.

(3) Under the Ordinance, the use of prohibited gear for fishing is liable to a maximum fine of \$200,000 and imprisonment for six months upon conviction, while the use of unregistered vessel for fishing activities is liable to a maximum fine of \$100,000 and imprisonment for six months upon conviction. Since the implementation of the relevant legislation, the highest penalty imposed have been a fine of \$100,000 and imprisonment for three months, as well as confiscating fishing gears involved in the case, such as ropes, nets, winches, etc. We consider that the level of penalty imposed by the courts has certain deterrent effect.

To enhance law enforcement capacity, the Food and Health Bureau has provided the AFCD with resources to increase manpower. The AFCD has strengthened and consolidated internal resources to set up a dedicated enforcement team at sea to enhance the mobility and responsiveness of enforcement actions against illegal fishing. The number of members in the enforcement team and the number of vessels have increased from 18 to 34 and from three to seven respectively. In addition, the AFCD has recently worked with fishermen to gather intelligence regarding illegal fishing by the use of

their fishing vessels. Together with the analysis of real-time satellite data, this would help the Department obtain more information on illegal fishing to formulate more effective enforcement operations and investigation.

Thank you, President.

LCQ7: Assistance for food business industry amid epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Tommy Cheung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

Since March last year, the Government has implemented a number of anti-epidemic measures to cope with the epidemic, dealing a heavy blow to the businesses of the food business industry (especially the food and beverage services sector). To assist the trades in tiding over the difficult times, the Government has launched several subsidy schemes under the Anti-epidemic Fund. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the Government launched the Food Licence Holders Subsidy Scheme last year to provide eight types of food business licence holders with a one-off subsidy of \$80,000 or \$200,000, of the respective numbers of applications received, approved and rejected by the Government, with a breakdown by licence type; the total amount of subsidies disbursed under the Scheme, and the average processing time of each application;

(2) of the number of applications submitted by employers of the food and beverage services sector under the Employment Support Scheme (ESS) which were approved by the Government, and the total amount of wage subsidies disbursed;

(3) as ESS stipulates that employers who have been disbursed wage subsidies are required to undertake not to lay off their employees during the relevant period and to spend the full amount of the subsidies on paying for employees' wages, and employers in breach of the undertaking will be fined, of the number of employers of the food and beverage services sector who were fined for breaching the undertaking, and the total amount of fines involved;

(4) given that the Government launched the Catering Business (Social Distancing) Subsidy Scheme and the Enhanced Catering Business (Social Distancing) Subsidy Scheme consecutively last year to provide eligible licence holders of restaurants and canteens in operation with a one-off subsidy in accordance with the approved gross floor area of their licensed

premises, of the respective numbers of applications received, approved and rejected by the Government under the two subsidy schemes; if there were rejected applications, of the reasons for that; and

(5) as the two subsidy schemes mentioned in (4) stipulate that the relevant food business licence must be valid throughout the whole period from the date of approval of the application to the specified date or else the Government will consider recovering from the applicant any subsidy disbursed and the related expenses incurred, of the number of applicants from whom the subsidies have been/are being recovered due to violation of the stipulation, and the total amount of subsidy involved?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office, my reply to the question raised by the Hon Tommy Cheung is as follows:

(1) The Food Licence Holders Subsidy Scheme launched under the first round of the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) in March 2020 was completed. A one-off subsidy of \$80,000 or \$200,000 was granted to eligible food business licence holders of eight types of food business premises in operation with a total subsidy amount of \$3.75 billion disbursed. The breakdown of various figures and amount of subsidy disbursed are in Annex I. The average time for processing an application by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) was about 15 working days.

(2) and (3) The Employment Support Scheme (ESS) Secretariat (the Secretariat) does not have statistics concerning the amount of wage subsidies being disbursed to employers in particular sectors under the ESS nor the statistics concerning the number of employers' organisations in particular sectors, or the amount of penalty imposed on employers payable to the Government and the Government's claw back of subsidies arising from not fulfilling one or both of the two undertakings, i.e not implementing redundancies during the subsidy period and spending all the subsidies on paying wages to their employees.

Nonetheless, since June 2020, the Secretariat has been publishing, by batches, the list of employers who have received wage subsidies under the ESS, the amount of subsidies and the total number of committed headcount of employees on the ESS website (www.ess.gov.hk) to enable monitoring of the ESS by the community and employees concerned. Stakeholders in the catering sector and the general public may obtain information about whether individual employers in the sector have received wage subsidies under the scheme and also the subsidy amount granted to the organisations.

(4) Under the second round of the AEF, the FEHD launched the Catering Business (Social Distancing) Subsidy Scheme and the Enhanced Catering Business (Social Distancing) Subsidy Scheme in May and August 2020 respectively to provide eligible licence holders of restaurants and factory canteens in operation with a one-off subsidy in accordance with the approved

gross floor area of their licensed premises. The application progress as at January 20, 2021 is in Annex II. The main reasons for refusing some of the applications under the two schemes include that the applicant failed to hold a valid food business licence issued by the FEHD, the provisional licence had expired but a full licence was not granted, or the licensed premises were found not in operation. The FEHD would provide a written reply to the applicants of the refusal cases with the reason(s).

(5) As stipulated in the above two subsidy schemes, the relevant food business licence (full or provisional licence) must be valid throughout the whole period from the date of approval of the application to the completion of the schemes. Otherwise, the FEHD will consider recovering from the applicant any subsidy granted and all related expenses incurred. As at January 20, 2021, there was one case in which the applicant did not obtain a full licence upon the expiry of the provisional licence during the funding period. The case is being followed up by the FEHD.

Government enforces “restriction-testing declaration” and compulsory testing notice in respect of specified “restricted area” in Tin Shui Wai (with photo)

The Government yesterday (February 2) exercised the power under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) to make a "restriction-testing declaration" (declaration) effective from 7pm yesterday, under which people within the specified "restricted area" in Tin Shui Wai (i.e. Heng Lok House, Tin Heng Estate, 83 Tin Shui Road, Tin Shui Wai, New Territories) are required to stay in their premises and undergo compulsory testing. Persons subject to compulsory testing are required to stay in their premises until all such persons identified in the area have undergone testing and the test results are mostly ascertained. In addition, the Government issued a compulsory testing notice yesterday to any person who had been present at the buildings for more than two hours from January 20 to February 2, 2021, to undergo compulsory testing before February 4 even if they were not present in the "restricted area" at the time when the declaration took effect. The Government finished the compulsory testing exercise at around 7am today (February 3) and carried out enforcement actions in the "restricted area" to verify that all people in the "restricted area" have undergone compulsory testing. The Government further announced the revocation time of the declaration.

Starting from around 7am today, persons in the "restricted area" in Tin Shui Wai who have undergone testing and are able to present SMS notifications with negative test results or wear wristbands as proof of having undergone testing may leave the "restricted area" through the designated exit after providing personal information to a prescribed officer.

The Government set up temporary specimen collection stations in the "restricted area" yesterday and requested persons subject to compulsory testing to collect combined nasal and throat swab samples at the stations to undergo a COVID-19 virus test before 2am today. The Government also understands that some residents already underwent testing at the testing station set up at Heng Lok House, Tin Heng Estate, or other means. Therefore, persons in the "restricted area" who have undergone testing from January 31 to February 2, 2021, and are able to provide the SMS notification through a mobile phone or related certification containing the test results, are not required to take the test again. From February 2 to 2am today, around 270 residents had undergone testing at the temporary specimen collection stations in the "restricted area" or the testing station set up at Heng Lok House, Tin Heng Estate. No confirmed cases were found.

Moreover, the Government also assigned staff to visit about 225 households, 13 of which did not answer the door. Those include some households with confirmed cases or undergoing quarantine. Some units are possibly vacant as well. The Government does not have detailed information in this respect and will take measures to follow up.

The Government reiterates that enforcement actions will be taken seriously. Any person who fails to present an SMS notification with a negative test result or wear a wristband as proof of having undergone testing breaches the compulsory testing notice and may be liable to a fine of \$5,000. The person will also be issued with a compulsory testing order, requiring him or her to undergo testing within a specified time frame. Failure to comply with the compulsory testing order or the "restriction-testing declaration" is an offence and the offender may be liable to a fine of level 4 (\$25,000) and imprisonment for six months.

