

Press Releases

LCQ13: Fully biliterate and trilingual civil service maintained

Following is a question by the Hon Ma Lik and a written reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Miss Denise Yue, on the policy to maintain a fully biliterate and trilingual civil service in the Legislative Council today (July 5):

Question:

Some ethnic minorities have complained to me that certain notices put up by government offices are in Chinese only, which they cannot understand. They also encounter difficulties when seeking emergency services from frontline staff, such as police officers or nurses, who indicate that they do not speak English.

In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) whether it has received any complaints in the past two years from the public about the failure of government departments or frontline staff to provide services or information in English; if it has, of the number of cases received in each year and their details, and whether any government officers have ever refused to provide services on the ground of their inability to speak English;

(b) of the circumstances under which notices put up or released to the public are written in Chinese only, and the policy and guidelines on assisting ethnic minorities in accessing government information;

(c) of the percentage of frontline staff, in particular those providing emergency services, who are not competent enough to communicate with others in English;

(d) whether it has drawn up any measures to provide English language training for such frontline staff and to encourage them to communicate with ethnic minorities in English; if so, of the details; and

(e) whether it will set up a telephone helpline for ethnic minorities who encounter difficulties in the course of seeking government services ?

Reply:

Madam President,

On part (a) of the question, as we do not maintain a central register on complaints received from the public, we are unable to provide the information sought. We wish to take this opportunity to re-state, for the record, that both Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong. Our policy is to maintain a fully biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) civil service to ensure effective communication with all sectors of the community.

On part (b) of the question, it is the Government's policy that all written materials meant for the public, such as government reports, consultative documents, forms, pamphlets, booklets, posters, notices, signs, etc., should be issued in both Chinese and English. Verbal and written Government announcements intended for the general public should also be bilingual. Government homepages should be bilingual as well. It is only in exceptional circumstances where there are strong operational or financial reasons may written communications with the public be monolingual. In such exceptional cases, the monolingual materials issued should

contain a bilingual caption, or a brief message in the other language directing the recipient to another source (such as a webpage or contact details of a subject officer) where further information in the other language can be obtained. The Civil Service Bureau reminds government offices regularly of the need for public communications to be bilingual.

On part (c) of the question, to ensure our civil service is proficient in both Chinese and English, we lay down appropriate language proficiency requirements for appointment to different grades in the civil service. Since January 2003, applicants for civil service posts at degree or professional level are required to have acquired a pass in the Use of English and Use of Chinese papers in the Civil Service Common Recruitment Examination. Applicants for other civil service posts are likewise generally required to have attained specified levels of proficiency in both Chinese and English. For example, applicants for the posts of Fireman, Ambulanceman, and Police Constable are required to have attained at least a Grade E in English Language (Syllabus B) and Chinese Language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, or its equivalent.

On part (d) of the question, the Government strives to provide its staff with appropriate training, including English language training, so that they can better serve the community. For example, individual departments such as the Hong Kong Police Force, Social Welfare Department, Department of Health and Housing Department, arrange job-specific and customised English language training for their staff from time to time. The Civil Service Training and Development Institute (CSTDI) organises general English language courses for staff. It also arranges courses on English speaking skills and the techniques of handling telephone calls and enquiries in English for frontline and other staff. Apart from classroom training, the CSTDI continuously enriches its online English language learning resources for use by government staff. There are currently 40 online English language courses and reference kits available. Over the past five years, some 27 000 government staff have attended the English language courses organised by the CSTDI. Over 40 per cent of them are frontline staff (such as clerks, nurses and police constables, etc.). Over 400 000 visitors have accessed the online English language reference materials, and some 30 000 staff have taken part in the online English language courses. Some departments with regular interface with ethnic minorities have put in place additional measures. For example, the Housing Department has guidelines to remind its staff that public notices in housing estates should be in both English and Chinese in order to cater for the need of the ethnic minorities. The Home Affairs Department has ensured that senior officers are available to assist frontline staff to serve ethnic minorities.

On part (e) of the question, members of the public, including ethnic minorities, wishing to make any enquiries or seek assistance in obtaining any government services may call the general enquiry hotline of the department concerned. Calls made in English will be answered in English. The public may also call the '1823' Citizen's Easy Link hotline which provides convenient 24-hour access for information on public services for 14 participating departments. For enquiries relating to services by other departments, the hotline will also provide the relevant contact details. Again calls made in English will be responded in English.

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