

Press Releases

LCQ11: Assistance for local residents illiterate in Chinese and English

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Yiu-chung and a written reply by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Stephen Lam, in the Legislative Council today (January 30):

Question:

Regarding the provision of public services, vocational training opportunities and language courses to local residents who are totally illiterate in Chinese or in both Chinese and English, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) Apart from the initiatives mentioned by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs in his response to the debate on a Member's motion at the Council meeting on July 11, 2007, whether the Government had provided other assistance to the above persons in the past three years, so that they would not be denied access to public services due to language barrier; if it had, please list by government departments details of the relevant assistance provided to the above two categories of persons respectively, the expenditure involved and the number of beneficiaries each year, as well as the means through which the persons concerned obtained such assistance; if no other assistance had been provided, the reasons for that;

(b) whether it will, by making reference to the practices in other places, establish central translation and interpretation services, which are to be provided by the Government, to assist the above persons in using the various public services; if it will, of the relevant details and the estimated expenditure involved; if not, the reasons for that;

(c) whether it has, in the light of the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework and relevant quality assurance mechanism, provided suitable vocational training courses for the above persons; if it has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(d) whether it has provided various courses and related tuition fee remission schemes for local residents who are not students and are totally illiterate in Chinese so as to assist them in learning Chinese to meet the needs in their daily life; if it has, of the details?

Reply :

Madam President,

(a) Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong.

It is Government policy that, in the delivery of public services, all government information and written materials for dissemination to the public are made available in both English and Chinese.

Letters from members of the public should be responded to, as far as possible, in the official language used in the in-coming correspondence. All frontline staff are required to answer enquiries or provide assistance in either English or Chinese depending on the language used by the client.

In the provision of major public services, Government departments will, as far as practicable, provide support or interpretation services to those who are unable to use Chinese or English, having regard to the needs of the individual concerned.

Specifically:

* As regards education, the Education Bureau (EDB) has taken concrete measures to enhance its services to non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students. Apart from the provision of additional funding and on-site support services to the selected "designated schools", action is in hand to develop a supplementary curriculum guide on the teaching of Chinese to NCS students and a tertiary institution has been commissioned to run training programmes for Chinese Language teachers. It has also commissioned a tertiary institution to run a Chinese Learning Support Centre to provide after school support for those NCS students who start late in learning Chinese.

The four-week Summer Bridging Programme offered to ethnic minority Primary One entrants has been extended to cover NCS students proceeding to Primary Two, Primary Three and Primary Four.

Information packages, produced in Chinese and English, as well as major ethnic minority languages, are also provided to NCS parents to inform them of the local education system and educational support services for NCS students. Meanwhile, the EDB has also made available information notes on school placement allocation systems in major ethnic minority languages and provided interpretation in English and major ethnic minority languages when conducting briefings. For education at the tertiary level, the EDB has reached consensus with University Grants Committee-funded tertiary institutions that under specific circumstances they would consider alternative qualifications in Chinese for NCS students. Relevant details are expected to be finalised in the near future;

* In respect of social and support services, Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres in various districts provide language courses, social and recreational activities as well as volunteer services to the youths in need. By taking part in these programmes, the youths not only have the opportunity to exchange and integrate with people with a different background, but also to enhance their communication skills and understanding of their local communities;

* As regards vocational training, the Employees' Retraining Board is running dedicated programmes in English for NCS students.

Teaching assistants will be deployed to act as the interpreter for the class as and when needed. Special arrangements are also made for trainees to answer test papers in English;

* For employment services, a range of free employment services are provided by the Labour Department (LD) to job seekers. Through its network of 12 Job Centres, Telephone Employment Service Centre and the bilingual Interactive Employment Service Website, the LD provides comprehensive employment counselling services to those looking for jobs. Job seekers may make use of the user-friendly vacancy search terminals at the Job Centres to browse through information on the latest job vacancies. The information is shown in English as well as in traditional and simplified Chinese. To facilitate the ethnic minorities using its employment services, the LD has translated a leaflet entitled "Easy-to-use Employment Services of the Labour Department" into Tagalog, Indonesian, Thai, Urdu, Hindi and Nepali. Other than exceptional cases (such as where the information concerned cannot be translated into English), all key information on job vacancies (e.g., type of vacancy, working hours, pay and place of work) are shown in both English and Chinese. For ethnic minority job seekers who wish to know more about a particular vacancy or who need further assistance, they may approach the staff of the Job Centres or the Telephone Employment Service Centre direct for information. Employment briefings are also organised at the Job Centres for the ethnic minorities on regular basis;

* As regard health care services, the Hospital Authority (HA) has endeavoured to make available free interpretation services for patients who do not know Chinese and English. All public hospitals

and clinics under the HA maintain a register of part-time interpreters who can be called upon by telephone to provide service as and when needed. Patients with medical appointments may also approach the hospitals and clinics in advance for the arrangement of appropriate interpretation services.

Apart from the above support services, various Government departments also provide assistance to those who are unable to use Chinese or both Chinese and English, having regard to the nature of service and the need of individuals concerned. The Government treats all members of the public equally and tailors its services to meet the needs of individual clients. We, therefore, do not maintain separate statistics on the number of local residents who are illiterate in Chinese or in both Chinese and English and who benefited from the service or on the expenditure involved.

(b) Currently, Government departments already provide interpretation service to clients, having regard to operational needs and the circumstances of the individuals. Whether a central translation and interpretation service should be established will depend on actual operational needs and the cost-effectiveness of such service. We will consider ways to improve and enhance existing interpretation services. No detailed information is available at this stage.

(c) The Government is promoting a Qualifications Framework (QF) to provide a platform for lifelong learning and to allow learners to progress along a clear pathway. Programmes and courses will be recognised under the QF if they are quality assured by the accreditation authorities. Training providers may develop on their own the appropriate training programmes and choose the medium of instruction having regard to the needs of their clients.

Since the 2006/07 academic year, the Vocational Training Council (VTC) has been running and subsidising vocational education training programmes, with English as the principal medium of instruction, which target at local residents who are illiterate in Chinese. To meet the needs of those who do not use Chinese or English, the VTC is considering the feasibility of organising special classes with interpretation assistance, so as to facilitate their training and taking of skill tests.

(d) Government subsidises various non-Government organisations to run language courses for those who are illiterate in Chinese. For instance, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau (CMAB) sponsors the International Social Service Hong Kong Branch, Caritas Hong Kong and Christian Action to organise Cantonese and English languages courses for ethnic minorities. It also funds two community development teams, one in Yau Tsim Mong and the other in Yuen Long, to promote community integration and cohesion through the provision of language classes and other services to ethnic minorities. The CMAB also provides funding to the Pakistani Community Support Team and the Nepalese Community Support Team, established by relevant ethnic minorities groups, to provide services including language courses and appropriate support to their ethnic communities members. In addition, various cross-cultural exchange and integrated learning programmes are organised by the Government to help NCS youths to integrate into the community through Cantonese classes and mentorship programmes.

These programmes are sponsored by the Government. Participants may join these programmes free of charge or be required only to pay a small application fee.

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