

LCQ9: Policy for driver training and Hong Kong School of Motoring

Following is a question by the Hon Ronny Tong Ka-wah and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Ms Eva Cheng, at the Legislative Council meeting today (June 22):

I have received requests for assistance from ex-driving instructors of the Hong Kong School of Motoring (HKSM), indicating that in 2003 when the number of learner drivers at HKSM dropped significantly which resulted in a surplus of driving instructors, more than 50 driving instructors with 10 to 20 years' instructing experience were made redundant by HKSM. They pointed out that as their driving instructors' licences only entitled them to give driving training within HKSM, their licences became invalid after they were made redundant, and thus they could not give driving training in the private market; moreover, given that there are not many driving schools in Hong Kong and the Transport Department (TD) had not issued new private driving instructors' (PDI) licences in the past three years, these instructors were forced to switch to other trades in their middle-age, and the livelihood of their families was also affected. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) whether the Government has considered further opening up the market for driving training services; if it has, when and how this will be implemented; if not, of the reasons for that; how the Government at present monitors the operation of HKSM and ensures that HKSM will not monopolise the market;

(b) as I have learnt that at a joint meeting held in March 2003 with the Labour Department, the HKSM management echelon had met with the aforesaid more than 50 driving instructors who were made redundant and undertaken that when there was an increase in the number of learner drivers at HKSM or a shortage of its driving instructors, it would give priority to employing these driving instructors who were made redundant, whether the Government knows if HKSM has fulfilled that undertaking; if so, of the number of driving instructors re-employed by HKSM in each of the past eight years; if not, the reasons for that;

(c) whether it knows the number of driving instructors newly recruited by HKSM since 2003 and their respective years of instructing experience; and among them, the number of those possessing PDI licences at the same time; and

(d) whether at present, TD gives preferential treatment to HKSM (e.g. shortening the waiting time for learner drivers attending HKSM to make appointments for road tests and the duration of on-the-road driving practices, and offering preferential treatment for road test venues) to strengthen its advantageous position?

Reply:

President,

(a) The Administration has all along adopted a "two-pronged" approach in respect of driver training. On one hand, we promote off-street driver training through the establishment of driving schools; on the other hand, we maintain a sufficient supply of private driving instructors (PDIs) for on-street driver training.

To ensure that the "two-pronged approach" driver training policy is sustainable, the Transport Department (TD) has reviewed biennially the need to issue new PDI licences since 1999, with a view to stabilising the supply of PDIs. Factors as stipulated in Road Traffic (Driving Licences) Regulations (Cap 374B) have to be taken into account:

- (a) prevailing traffic conditions;
- (b) policy adopted for driver training for the time being; and
- (c) demand for learner drivers to receive driving instruction from private driving instructors in respect of that group of motor vehicles.

We also agreed with the PDI trade in 1999 that the number of valid PDI licences prevailing at the time for the three groups of PDIs (note) would be used as benchmarks. TD may consider issuing new PDI licences for a particular group when the number of valid licences falls below the benchmark by 10%.

TD conducted reviews in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008, which concluded to issue a total of 633 new PDI licences to maintain the stable supply of on-street driver training.

On the other hand, designated driving schools are established in accordance with section 88K of the Road Traffic Ordinance (Cap 374) (the Ordinance) to provide off-street driver training. The existing designated driving schools are:

- (a) Siu Lek Yuen Driving School;
- (b) Kwun Tong Driving School;
- (c) Ap Lei Chau Driving School; and
- (d) Yuen Long Driving School.

To monitor the operation of designated driving schools, TD has issued Code of Practice in accordance with the Ordinance to specify the different requirements in relation to driver training courses, such as their contents, procedures, standards, etc. TD has also assigned officers to conduct inspections to monitor the relevant courses. Designated driving school may recruit holders of PDI licences or restricted driving instructor (RDI) licences as driving instructors. There is no restriction in respect of the number of RDI licences, but their holders are only permitted to provide driver training services at the designated driving schools by which they are employed, and the relevant licences will cease to be valid once they leave the schools. This arrangement strikes a balance between private driving instructors and designated driving school in respect of provision of driver training services.

The present market of driver training is open. Learner drivers are free to choose between receiving driver training either at designated driving schools or from a PDI. In fact, in the past three years, around 60% of candidates taking TD's driving tests received their training from PDIs, which suggests that there is no monopoly of the driver training market.

(b) and (c) The undertaking made by the Hong Kong School of Motoring (HKSM) as mentioned in the relevant question is a negotiation between HKSM and its driving instructors. TD was not involved in the relevant discussion at that time. TD was informed by HKSM that it had not recruited any new driving instructors since 2003 after having laid-off some of the driving instructors under its designated driving schools. As such, the circumstances of whether priority should be given to the driving instructors concerned do not exist. In fact, the HKSM also experiences a declining trend in respect of the number of students in recent years. The number of persons applying for driving tests at TD through HKSM has dropped by over 20% since 2003, similar to the trend of the total number of persons applying for driving tests over the same period.

(d) TD has all along handled requirements in relation to the facilities and equipment of designated driving schools in accordance with established practice and guidelines, with a view to ensuring that the schools are suitably equipped. No preferential

treatment has been given to any designated driving school. On the arrangement of driving tests, TD has been assigning driving examiners to different driving test centres (including designated driving schools) for conducting driving tests in a fair manner, in accordance with the objective analysis on, and in proportion to, the numbers of test forms sold for designated driving schools and PDIs. Learner drivers of designated driving schools are not given any priority for taking driving tests. Separately, with regard to driver training, learner drivers who receive training from PDIs are free to decide on the number of training hours; whereas learner drivers of private cars/light goods vehicles of designated driving schools are required to receive at least 30 hours of indoor and practical training before they are allowed to take driving tests conducted by TD, as stipulated in the Code of Practice issued by TD.

Note: The three groups concerned are: group 1 - private cars and light goods vehicles; group 2 - public light buses, private light buses, public buses and private buses; and group 3 - medium goods vehicles, heavy goods vehicles and articulated vehicles.

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