

LCQ15: Support to elite athletes

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Following is a question by Dr Hon Lam Tai-fai and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, in the Legislative Council today (January 27):

Question:

The Government has provided additional resources to strengthen the financial assistance for elite athletes since 2007-2008, and young athletes with potential are selected by the Hong Kong Sports Institute for focused training. Yet, some members of the community have pointed out that athletes in general lack protection for their livelihood, and it is obvious that when they develop their athletic career full-time, they do not have time to develop other skills, resulting in the lack of protection for their livelihood upon retirement. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) whether it knows the numbers of elite athletes and elite sports as well as the average retirement age of such athletes in each of the past five years;

(b) apart from providing grants to cover the medical and insurance expenses for elite athletes through the Elite Training Grant scheme, whether the Government will consider setting up an independent medical and life insurance scheme for them; if it will, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(c) whether it will consider providing interest-free mortgage loans for elite athletes, so as to reduce the burden on their livelihood; if it will, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(d) whether it will consider waiving the personal income tax for elite athletes and providing them with pension grant upon their retirement; if it will, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(e) whether it will consider paying all the tuition and textbook fees for elite athletes who are studying in schools; if it will, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(f) whether it will consider collaborating with various public transport operators to launch a scheme on free rides on public transport for elite athletes; if it will, of the

details; if not, the reasons for that;

(g) whether it will consider giving priority to retired elite athletes in recruitment of civil servants (e.g. in various disciplined forces); and

(h) whether it will consider adopting the operation mode of Hong Kong Trade Development Council and establishing a sports development council and recruit sports professionals to be responsible for coordinating sports development and formulating policies to ensure that serving and retired athletes receive more comprehensive protection?

Reply:

President,

Developing elite sports is one of the HKSAR Government's three strategic directions for sports development. The Government provides annual funding to the Hong Kong Sports Institute (HKSI) to train elite athletes. This includes direct financial support to qualified athletes, which aims to help them focus on training thereby allowing them to perform at their best in competitions. Support is also available in other areas including education and employment advice to help athletes prepare for life after retirement from competition.

As at the end December of 2009, the HKSI was training and providing support to 863 athletes in 14 elite sports and 10 non-elite sports, of which about 100 were in residence at the institute. The numbers of athletes receiving training and support from the HKSI and the sports concerned, as well as the numbers of retired athletes and their average retirement ages, in the past five years are listed in the annex.

The Government has helped elite athletes meet their daily expenses by raising their direct financial support by way of significant increases in allocations for the HKSI since April 2007. The funding concerned has increased from \$15.5 million in 2006-2007 to \$56.5 million in 2009-2010. The new allocation has not only made additional training places for elite athletes possible, but also allowed more athletes to train on a full time basis. Also in August 2009, the Sports Commission endorsed increases in incentive awards for medallists at major games to provide material support to athletes who achieve outstanding results.

At present, apart from direct financial support, the HKSI takes out insurance policies for athletes who train there full-time. Coverage includes life, accident, travel, medical (hospitalisation and out-patient service) and dental care. There are also resident doctors and a medical team stationed at the HKSI to provide medical support to athletes.

As for the suggestion of providing interest-free mortgage loans for athletes, the Government is of the view that the decision as to whether or not to buy a home is up to individual members of the public (including athletes) based on preference and affordability.

Regarding the suggestion of waiving personal income tax for athletes, it has always been the Government's policy to maintain a fair and neutral tax system. Waiving taxes for certain categories of people would violate the principle of fairness and neutrality. Besides, athletes eligible for direct financial support already make contributions under the Mandatory Provident Fund Scheme. Upon retirement from competition, they may claim their benefits in accordance with the provisions of the Scheme.

As for the suggestion of paying the tuition and textbook fees for elite athletes who are studying in schools, the Government already provides nine-year universal primary and junior secondary education, as well as senior secondary education (starting from the 2008-2009 school year) free of charge to all young people (including elite athletes) through public sector schools. The HKSI also supports athletes' study needs focusing in particular on preparation for retirement, through a number of programmes, as detailed below -

#### (I) Hong Kong Athletes Fund

Athletes enrolled in approved certificate, diploma or degree courses offered by Hong Kong educational institutions may apply for tuition grants and subsistence allowance from the fund.

#### (II) Elite Athletes Education Subsidy

Athletes studying in approved continuing education institutions and vocational training institutes (for degree, diploma or certificate courses) may receive reimbursement of the tuition fees.

#### (III) Elite Athletes Tutorial Support

Flexible arrangements are provided for athletes requiring tuition in languages, mathematics, and other arts, science and business subjects. Subject tutors align classes with athletes' training schedules and provide one-to-one study guidance.

#### (IV) Athlete Development Programme

This is a comprehensive programme providing athletes with extra learning opportunities. It offers workshops on themes such as communication and public speaking skills, goal-setting and time management, financial planning and image building. Athletes receive help in developing personal management skills through learning experiences, and the programme aims to enrich athletes' life as sportsmen and women and improve their professionalism.

#### (V) Elite Athletes Apprenticeship Programme

This is a programme tailor-made for athletes who will retire from competition in two years. Under the programme, athletes gain actual work experience, thus preparing them for life after retirement.

Concerning the proposal to allow elite athletes to ride free of charge on public transport, the direct financial support currently provided to elite athletes through the HKSI already takes into account daily expenses, including those of transportation. Whether or not to provide fare concessions to elite athletes is a commercial decision for public transport operators.

To address the needs of retired elite athletes and help them integrate into society, since 2008, the Government has provided a subvention to the HKSI to allow it to run the Enhanced Athletes Educational and Vocational Development Programmes, which provide diverse educational and career development support to athletes. The HKSI also offers tailor-made coach training programmes through the Elite Coaching Apprenticeship Programme to help elite athletes wishing to become coaches after retirement.

In July 2008, we allocated \$8.5 million to the Sports Federation & Olympic Committee of Hong Kong, China (SF&OC) to establish the Hong Kong Athletes Career and Education Programme (HKACEP) to provide education and career development support for current and retired athletes. The business sector has responded to the programme and 10 corporations have agreed to offer vocational opportunities to retired athletes.

Regarding recruitment of civil servants, we welcome retired athletes joining and working in the Government after going through the necessary assessment procedures. It is the aim of the Government, as an equal opportunities employer, to appoint the best person for the job on the basis of merit. Appointment to the civil service is based on open and fair competition. In assessing applicants' suitability for civil service jobs, the recruiting bureaux or departments will take into account academic or professional qualifications, technical skills, work experience, language proficiency, and other qualities or attributes as may be required for particular jobs. As the aim is to appoint the best person for the job on the basis of merit and in accordance with the principle of open and fair competition, it is not appropriate to accord priority to retired elite athletes when recruiting civil servants.

As for the suggestion to establish a sports development council, we note that the Sports Commission and its Elite Sports Committee already include representatives from the sports community, whilst the Board of Directors and the management of the HKSI also comprise a number of seasoned sports professionals who advise on elite sports development policy and the implementation of measures to support athletes. We will give due regard to measures that may provide more comprehensive protection to athletes. We consider that the existing framework for sports development policy is effective and that there is no need to establish a sports development council.

Ends/Wednesday, January 27, 2010