

LCQ20: Mechanism to handle travellers' complaints

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mrs Rita Lau, in the Legislative Council today (April 28):

Question:

It has been learnt that at present, when outbound travellers are dissatisfied with travel agencies' decisions on embarkation or itineraries of package tours, they can lodge complaints with the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) only. Yet, it has been reported recently that the management of TIC is alleged to be controlled by some TIC Board directors who have conflicts of interest, and favours the interests of the trade and ignores the safety and interests of travellers when handling travellers' complaints. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) what effective and credible mechanism and measures are in place at present to monitor TIC's procedure for handling travellers' complaints and review its decisions made thereof;

(b) whether it has set up a mechanism for handling travellers' dissatisfaction about TIC's handling of their complaints or its decisions; if not, of the reasons for that; if it has, the specific operation of the mechanism, and the names of the responsible bureau(x) and government department(s); whether it has announced and publicised the mechanism to the public; if it has, of the specific details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(c) whether it has taken the initiative to conduct random checks on the travellers' complaints handled by TIC; if not, of the reasons for that; if it has, the number of such cases being randomly checked in each of the past three years and, among them, the number of cases in which the Government was required to take the initiative to contact the complainants and offer them assistance due to misconduct of TIC?

Reply:

President,

Travellers who are dissatisfied with the services of travel agents in Hong Kong may lodge complaints with the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) or the Consumer Council (CC).

The TIC has an established mechanism to handle travellers' complaints. On receiving a complaint, the TIC Executive Office will contact the complainant to get the details of the case and initiate mediation, with a view to finding a solution acceptable to both the complainant and the party being complained about. If mediation fails, the complainant may request that the case be referred to the Consumer Relations Committee of the TIC (the Committee) for handling.

Travellers' complaints are handled by panels set up under the Committee. The Committee secretariat invites seven Committee members to form a panel each time. The quorum for the panel meeting is five, among which non-trade members must constitute the majority, so as to ensure that both the trade and the consumers' interests are looked after. Members attending the panel meeting are required to declare their interest in accordance with the procedures. To ensure impartiality and objectivity of the panel in handling complaints, the identities of the complainant and party being complained about will be kept confidential in the Committee papers.

My reply to the various parts of the question is as follows.

(a) & (b) To enhance the transparency of the TIC's handling of complaints from travellers, the TIC has uploaded onto its website for public information a note on complaint-handling procedures, complaint forms and guidelines for handling complaints by the Committee, so that travellers can have easy access to the relevant procedures. Travellers may also submit their complaint forms online or call the TIC hotline for information on how to lodge a complaint or seek assistance.

Besides lodging complaints with the TIC, travellers may also approach the CC for assistance. They may also take legal action, such as filing a claim with the Small Claims Tribunal.

(c) The TIC's Board of Directors (the Board) oversees the TIC's complaint-handling mechanism and procedures. The Government will not intervene under normal circumstances. Besides trade representatives, the Board comprises non-trade independent persons from various sectors and different professional backgrounds appointed by the Government.

The Tourism Commission also closely monitors the operation of the TIC, and will offer advice and assistance.

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