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Other News

Agents cancel Lunar New Year trips

JO PEGG

More than 1,000 holidaymakers have had Lunar New Year trips cancelled through a loophole allowing travel agents to offer costly alternatives at the last minute.

The Travel Industry Council said yesterday it had been bombarded with complaints.

Passengers were being told their tour had been called off or was full, but that a similar one - costing up to 30 per cent more - was available.

Council chief executive Joseph Tung Yau-chung said the 278 complaints received since Monday arose from six travel agents.

Eighty-eight complaints had been made against a single agency.

He said: "We are very concerned about the situation. The council has realised there is a grey area in the existing regulations which may be exploited by a small number of travel agencies to cancel low-priced tours."

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Front Page

Hong Kong

China

Asia

World

Business

Markets

Focus

Sport

Property

Technology

Index

Archive

Special Reports



It was unclear whether tours had been overbooked, or whether agents had taken bookings for tours they had no intention of providing.

If agents were found to have deliberately cheated customers, they could be fined or closed.

Passengers must pay for Lunar New Year tours at least 21 days before departure, but agents can cancel tours up to 14 days before they begin, provided they offer a full refund. If the trip is cancelled closer to the departure date, agents must give a full refund plus three per cent.

Mr Tung said travellers who had complained had been offered refunds.

"They just feel they've been cheated because they had planned their holidays and at the end of the day have been told they can't travel. They're quite upset."

There was usually a trickle of complaints at this time of year, but this Lunar New Year was much worse than usual.

Mr Tung said part of the reason was that the industry had been caught off guard by the numbers wanting to travel over the break, and was now scrambling to put on extra flights.

Prices had been slashed to attract more travellers, and Mr Tung said it seemed families had been saving up for one trip a year and were taking it now.

The council would look at how regulations governing agents could be tightened to prevent cheating.

[Back To Top](#)



[Front Page](#) | [Hong Kong](#) | [China](#) | [Asia](#) | [World](#) | [Business Markets](#) | [Focus](#) | [Sport](#) | [Property](#) | [Technology](#) | [Index](#)

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concerned
about the
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