

LCQ2: Information technology support for government personnel working from home

Following is a question by the Hon Charles Mok and a written reply by the Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Mr Alfred Sit, in the Legislative Council today (May 13):

Question:

From January 29 to the end of April this year, the Government made arrangements for government personnel not providing emergency and essential public services to work from home. Regarding the details of the information technology support, such as newly installed or procured computers and other mobile devices/equipment and computer software as well as enhanced capacities of communications/networks/databases, provided by the various government departments to support their staff to work efficiently from home, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the details of the (i) computers and other mobile devices/equipment as well as (ii) computer software which were newly installed or procured by the various government departments (set out respectively in Tables 1 and 2);

Table 1

Name of department	Type of computers/devices/equipment	Brand and model number	General retail price	Supplier and unit purchase price	Purpose	Quantity	Expenditure account

Table 2

Name of department	Type of software	Brand, software name and version	General retail price	Supplier and unit purchase price	Purpose	Quantity	Expenditure account

(2) of the details of the enhancement made by the various government departments to the capacities of their communications/networks/databases (set out in Table 3);

Table 3

Name of department	Type	Enhancement percentage	Supplier/contractor	Purpose	Expenditure	Expenditure account

(3) of (i) the number of staff members who were newly authorised by the various government departments to access government intranets and servers through virtual private networks (VPNs) to facilitate their receipt and delivery of emails as well as their storage and retrieval of information (how such number compares with the relevant figure before implementation of the work-from-home arrangements), as well as (ii) the details of the enhancement made by the various government departments to the capacities of their VPN facilities (including the increase in the number of real time concurrent users allowed);

(4) of the respective numbers of staff members in the various government departments to whom notebook computers that can be connected to government intranets and servers were distributed (with a breakdown by rank);

(5) of the number of staff members who were newly authorised by the various government departments to access government intranets and servers for storing and retrieving government confidential information outside office, and how such number compares with the relevant figure before implementation of the work-from-home arrangements; and

(6) of the additional measures adopted to mitigate the information security risks arising from the implementation of the work-from-home arrangements for government personnel?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with policy bureaux and departments, our reply to the six-part question is set out below:

(1) and (2) To implement the work from home arrangement for government staff, government departments have procured additional computers and other mobile devices/equipment, computer software, and enhanced the capacities of their communications/networks/databases according to their operational and staffing demands. The relevant information is at Tables 1 to 3.

(3) Government departments have all along been arranging authorised staff to access their departmental intranets and servers by Virtual Private Network (VPN) for working remotely. Under the work from home arrangement due to the COVID-19 epidemic, between January 29 and end-April 2020, the number of staff authorised for using VPN increased by about 5 150. The number of real-time concurrent users has also increased by about 2 050.

(4) Between January 29 and end-April 2020, about 4 600 additional government staff were provided with notebook computers for accessing departmental

intranets and servers. We do not have the breakdown by rank.

(5) Between January 29 and end-April 2020, the number of staff authorised for accessing classified information outside their offices through equipment provided by the government and secure communications channels has increased by about 2 600.

(6) According to the Government IT Security Policy and Guidelines, while ensuring information security, departments can provide individual government staff with equipment such as notebook computers and mobile devices so that they can work from home by remotely accessing government systems and networks through secure communications channels (including encrypted VPN connections with two-factor authentication). Such equipment have installed security patches and anti-malware software which are regularly updated so as to guard against hacking or leakage of information. Relevant staff cannot store government classified data on their own computers and mobile devices.

In addition, all departments must arrange regular training like seminars and workshops to promote staff awareness of cyber security, covering information related to remote access to government systems and networks. The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer also reminds departments and their staff from time to time of cyber security information including awareness of phishing attacks and security precautions to take in using video conferencing, etc.

LCQ3: Management of public finance

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Leung and a written reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Christopher Hui, in the Legislative Council today (May 13):

Question:

Article 107 of the Basic Law stipulates that "[t]he Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall follow the principle of keeping the expenditure within the limits of revenues in drawing up its budget, and strive to achieve a fiscal balance, avoid deficits and keep the budget commensurate with the growth rate of its gross domestic product". Regarding the management of public finance, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has set a requirement on the minimum level of fiscal reserves; if so, of the details and justifications; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has set a floor on the accumulated surplus of the Exchange Fund; if so, of the details and justifications; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it has estimated the likelihood of having structural fiscal deficits in the coming 15 years; if so, of the details, including the respective growth rates of government revenue, public expenditure as well as nominal and real Gross Domestic Products on which the estimation was based; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

(1) Since the financial year 1997-98, the Government has maintained its fiscal reserves at a level equivalent to 13 to 28 months of government expenditure. In preparing the Budget every year, the Government endeavours to strike a proper balance among the levels of revenue, expenditure and fiscal reserves, taking also into account the imminent and long-term needs of the society, in drawing up suitable measures and financial arrangements. With ample fiscal reserves, the Government is able to introduce suitable measures to relieve people's burden during the economic downturn. Due to the continuous development of the economy and society, the fiscal requirements would vary, and it is inappropriate to set a rigid benchmark as a level of fiscal reserves. As set out in the Medium Range Forecast (MRF) in the Appendices of the 2020-21 Budget, the Government's fiscal reserves would, throughout the forecast period up to March 31, 2025, stay at a level equivalent to 15 months or more of government expenditure.

(2) The Exchange Fund (the Fund) is established and managed in accordance with the Exchange Fund Ordinance. Apart from specific items, such as transfer from the Fund, the Ordinance does not set a ceiling or floor on the accumulated surplus of the Fund.

(3) Article 107 of the Basic Law stipulates that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall follow the principle of keeping the expenditure within the limits of revenues in drawing up its budget, and strive to achieve a fiscal balance, avoid deficits and keep the budget commensurate with the growth rate of its gross domestic product. The Government strives to ensure that, over time, the growth rate of expenditure should be commensurate with that of the economy. According to the MRF, for the four financial years starting from 2021-22, the fiscal deficit is estimated at about \$14 billion per annum on average. Compared with the government expenditure of about \$700 billion a year, a fiscal balance can broadly be achieved. For the forecasting assumptions and budgetary criteria applied in the MRF, please refer to Appendix A of the Budget.

LCQ4: Online teaching and learning

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (May 13):

Question:

In view of the severity of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Education Bureau has earlier deferred for several times the resumption of classes at schools and recommended that schools should provide students with learning materials through school websites, e-learning platforms, etc. during the period of class suspension, so that students can continue their studies at home, thereby achieving the objective of "suspending classes without suspending learning". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the Government launched in the last school year an assistance programme known as "Provision of Subsidy to Needy Primary and Secondary Students for Purchasing Mobile Computer Devices to Facilitate the Practice of e-Learning" under the Community Care Fund to subsidise students to purchase mobile computer devices, whether the Government will consider extending the assistance programme's scope of subsidy to cover the costs for Internet access and acquisition of ancillary equipment as well as raising the subsidy rate, so as to assist grass-roots families in meeting the relevant expenses; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as quite a number of parents of grass-roots families have relayed that they lack the knowledge and skills to guide their children on computer operation and online learning, of the measures put in place by the Government to assist such parents, and whether it will organise related seminars or workshops;

(3) on making pre-recorded teaching videos for students to watch on their own and conducting real-time online teaching, whether the Government has studied the differences between these two approaches in terms of effectiveness in teaching and learning; whether it has examined the situation and effect of the use of video conferencing software by schools in teaching; and

(4) whether it has reviewed the mode, operation and effectiveness of online teaching implemented by schools throughout Hong Kong during the period of class suspension; whether it will draw up guidelines on the teaching requirements and modes for online teaching for schools to follow; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

During the period of class suspension, the Education Bureau (EDB) has recommended that schools should continue to support students in their home

learning through suitable modes of learning and teaching according to their own circumstances and the needs of students at different key stages. Teaching and learning modes are diversified. Both online and offline learning should focus on encouraging students' self-directed learning at home and cater for students' needs and the school context. E-learning is only a form of learning. Apart from real-time online teaching, teachers may provide students with learning materials, after-school exercises and texts for extra-curricular reading, collect assignments and offer feedback by using the learning management systems that they are familiar with, as well as emails and the school website. Schools may also encourage students to read extensively, carry out thematic explorations, etc. so as to enhance their ability to engage in self-directed learning and hence achieve the goal of continuous learning at home.

All along, the EDB has been, through professional development programmes and on-site support services, deepening teachers' e-learning capabilities and their competence in using e-learning tools and resources. During the period of class suspension, the EDB has created a dedicated webpage to share the skills of using e-learning platforms, the flipped classroom approach and real-time online teaching, etc. In addition, we also offer advice and support to teachers in need continuously through hotline services, mobile communication applications, webinars and online self-learning courses, etc. The Hong Kong Education City has also launched a dedicated webpage to consolidate some learning and teaching resources for the use of schools, teachers, students and parents.

Our reply to the Hon Elizabeth Quat's question is as follows:

(1) Through the Community Care Fund, the EDB has been implementing a three-year assistance programme, providing a subsidy to needy primary and secondary students from public schools adopting the "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD) policy to purchase mobile computer devices since the 2018/19 school year. In view of the fact that many schools have attempted to continue teaching via electronic platforms amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the EDB has exercised flexibility in handling the applications submitted by all schools implementing e-learning during the period of class suspension for their needy students, irrespective of whether they have implemented BYOD or not. Apart from purchasing mobile computer devices, the subsidy can also be used to cover the cost of some basic accessories, such as screen shield, protective cover, detachable keyboard, stylus pen and mouse. Schools may also use the subsidy to purchase other necessary accessories for their students depending on their learning needs. For students receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance or full grant under the School Textbook Assistance Scheme (STAS), a subsidy is provided to cover the full cost of the device and items mentioned above. For students receiving half grant under the STAS, the subsidy provided is half of the actual cost of the items. The maximum level of subsidy received by each benefited student will be adjusted annually according to the movement of the Composite Consumer Price Index. The maximum amount of full subsidy in the 2018/19 school year is \$4,500. According to the reports submitted by participating schools, the actual amount of subsidy required by each student receiving full subsidy is on average \$3,984.

In addition, the Government has been disbursing a subsidy for Internet access charges to eligible families through the Student Finance Office of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency and the Social Welfare Department, providing support for students from grass-roots families to subscribe to basic Internet plans provided by operators of fixed or mobile telecommunications services. The rate of the subsidy is adjusted regularly with reference to prevailing market fees of Internet access services.

(2), (3) and (4) As mentioned in the preamble, there are diversified modes that support students' home learning. Considering that students' needs vary with key stages and schools have different circumstances, the EDB has not prescribed a single mode for all schools across the board. Instead, schools may select from a variety of teaching strategies the suitable modes for their students, including e-learning, to support students' home learning. Teachers should exercise professional judgement to adopt teaching strategies, learning and teaching resources, as well as learning activities appropriate to the needs of their students in order to cater for learner diversity. In addition, e-learning should focus on the flexible use of various electronic media (including digital resources and communication tools) to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching as well as the qualities of students (such as self-directed learning abilities) in accordance with teaching goals and the needs of students. The making of teaching videos or conducting of real-time online teaching is only one of the many e-learning strategies, each of which has its own purposes and characteristics. For instance, teachers can produce video clips and students can complete the online exercises after viewing the clips of their own accord. Teachers can then track students' learning progress through the relevant records and provide them with learning support accordingly. Teachers who deliver real-time online lessons can have instant interaction with student groups and provide them with instant guidance and feedback. To enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching, it is imperative that teachers should master the advantages of different electronic media and integrate them in learning and teaching as appropriate.

The actual implementation of the relevant strategies has to be well-planned with thorough consideration of and full co-ordination on issues such as the learning needs of students at different ages and with special needs, students' power of concentration, impact on eye health caused by prolonged use of electronic screens, students' socio-economic backgrounds, hardware and Internet connection speed at home, and the necessary training for teachers. Schools should also provide technical support to students and parents and answer their enquiries. In formulating study plans, schools should adopt modes of learning which teachers and students have confidence in and are easy to master; and premise on the principle of not exerting undue pressure on students and parents. Schools should also maintain close communication with parents and assess from time to time whether their school-based plans are being taken forward as expected and make necessary modification or adjustment. Hence, they must carefully assess whether those online learning modes, which teachers, students and parents are unfamiliar with, could suit their circumstances and achieve learning effectiveness. During the class suspension period, schools still keep their premises open and have staff on duty to support students who have to return to schools because of individual

needs and answer parents' enquiries. Students and parents with doubts or difficulties may take the initiative to seek appropriate assistance from the schools.

On the other hand, close communication between schools and parents is needed to address issues such as the impact of full implementation of e-learning inside and outside classroom on students' health and parents' awareness of the pros and cons involved including the possibility of Internet addiction. Therefore, the EDB has been providing teachers with professional development programmes and information kits on e-learning and e-safety, so as to assist schools in undertaking relevant parent education. Besides providing seminars for parents, a telephone hotline has been set up to provide individual support for parents, teachers and students in need. Links to the resources on e-safety produced by other government departments and non-governmental organisations are also available on our website (www.edb.gov.hk/il/eng) for access by parents and students.

During the period of class suspension, the EDB has set up a dedicated webpage with dozens of videos uploaded, elucidating the skills of using e-learning platforms, flipped classroom approach and real-time online teaching for teacher's reference to better equip them with the relevant teaching strategies. In addition, we have been organising webinars on different topics every week since late January 2020 to share updated information and experience on implementing online teaching. As at April 2020, dozens of webinars have been organised. In addition to explaining the principles of adopting e-learning to support students' home learning in letters and through "Insider's Perspective" and "Clear the Air" articles, we have also uploaded the relevant information to the EDB's website for schools' reference.

The EDB has maintained communication with schools through various channels to better understand the situation and the problems encountered by schools in the implementation of "suspending classes without suspending learning" during the period of class suspension, so as to provide appropriate support according to their needs. As far as we know, during the period of class suspension, schools generally undertake e-learning by different means, which include producing teaching videos, conducting real-time online teaching, using e-learning platforms/learning management systems to arrange teaching activities, as well as distributing learning and teaching materials to students via emails/intranets. Furthermore, in view of the situation of some students (including those lacking computer access or encountering technical difficulties in online learning), schools have also assisted them in keeping up their learning progress by other effective means (such as sending the learning and teaching materials to students by post). Teachers also make phone calls to students from time to time to understand their learning progress and provide them with necessary support. We also note that schools, building on their past experience, are further promoting diversified learning modes (including e-learning) to support students in their home learning. These experience can serve as reference for future development. In anticipation of future needs, the EDB will review the class suspension arrangements made in response to the recent epidemic and identify areas for

improvement. Moreover, schools are encouraged to make good use of various assessment materials to track the learning progress of students during the period of class suspension, so that proper follow-up can be taken upon class resumption.

LCQ6: Quarantine requirement for persons arriving at Hong Kong from the Mainland

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Chi-chuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 13):

Question:

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic is still rampant across the globe at present. On the 28th of last month, the Government announced its plan to relax the requirement of the 14-day compulsory quarantine for persons arriving at Hong Kong from the Mainland on the grounds that the epidemic on the Mainland has been brought under control. However, quite a number of members of the public suspect whether the Mainland authorities have disseminated comprehensive data on the epidemic. As such, they query that it is premature for the Government to relax the relevant requirement. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has grasped (i) the number of asymptomatic infection cases of COVID-19 in the statistics compiled and (ii) the number of tests for COVID-19 conducted, by the Mainland authorities from January 1 to April 15 this year; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that, and whether it will review the aforesaid plan to relax the quarantine requirement; and

(2) whether it will consider sending experts to the Mainland again to gain an understanding of the situation of the epidemic there, including the numbers of confirmed cases, asymptomatic infection cases, suspected infection cases and tests for COVID-19 conducted; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Chi-chuen is as follows:

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB), the then-Ministry of Health of the Central People's Government and the Secretariat for Social Affairs and Culture (SSAC) of the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region signed the Co-operation Agreement on Response Mechanism for Public Health Emergencies (the Agreement) in 2005. The Agreement was updated with the National Health Commission (NHC) and SSAC in 2018. The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health has maintained close liaison with the NHC according to the mechanism under the Agreement to notify one another of surveillance data on infectious diseases, emergency public health incidents and responses to major infectious diseases, etc., with a view to strengthening joint efforts in disease prevention and control.

With regards to the outbreak of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19), the CHP received notifications from the NHC respectively on December 31, 2019 and January 3 and 5, 2020 that a number of viral pneumonia cases with unknown cause had been identified through disease surveillance by health authorities in Wuhan since December 2019. Also, in mid-January 2020, at the invitation of the NHC and the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council, the FHB sent a delegation to Wuhan to learn more about the outbreak. The NHC has been notifying the CHP of the latest information on the outbreak in a timely manner since December 31, 2019 according to the mechanism under the Agreement.

The Mainland has been reporting the number of asymptomatic infected cases detected through enhanced surveillance since March 31, 2020. As at May 10, the Mainland had reported 1 747 asymptomatic infected cases, with an average of 43 cases per day. Among them, 356 cases (20 per cent) were imported cases, 261 cases subsequently displayed symptoms. Guangdong Province reported 279 asymptomatic infected cases during the abovementioned period, with an average of 6.8 cases per day. Among them, 105 cases (38 per cent) were imported cases.

All along, we have been paying heed to science and expert advice and adopting a "suppress and lift" strategy to put in place necessary prevention and control measures after careful consideration of factors such as public health, the economic situation and acceptance level of the general public, etc. The Government conducts detailed risk assessments prior to implementing border control and compulsory quarantine measures in response to the disease outbreak in other countries or regions, and will review and consider rationalising the relevant measures in view of the development of the outbreak. We will continue to maintain close liaison and co-operation with the health authorities in the Mainland and other countries and regions as well as relevant international organisations on handling and controlling the outbreak together, in order to safeguard the health of the Hong Kong people and the robustness of Hong Kong's healthcare system.

LCQ11: Cancellation of dividend payments already announced

Following is a question by the Hon Holden Chow and a written reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Christopher Hui, in the Legislative Council today (May 13):

Question:

On February 18 this year, the Board of HSBC Holdings plc (HSBC) announced that its fourth interim dividend in respect of 2019 would be paid on April 14 this year and the ex-dividend date would be February 27. On March 31, HSBC announced that in response to the request of the regulatory authority in the United Kingdom, it had decided to cancel the said dividend payment which had been announced. It also decided that it would not make any quarterly or interim dividend payments until the end of this year. Some minority shareholders of HSBC are of the view that HSBC's cancellation of the dividend payment already announced is unethical and has undermined investors' confidence in the stock market. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows if there were incidents in the past, apart from the aforesaid case, in which listed companies announced dividend payments and then cancelled them; if there were, of the details, and whether such practice violated the relevant requirements; and

(2) given that the dividends paid by HSBC have been a major source of income for quite a number of Hong Kong residents (especially for retirees), whether the authorities (i) will urge HSBC to have regard to the economic situation and the interest of minority shareholders in Hong Kong and reconsider its decision of not making dividend payments, and (ii) have assessed the impacts of the cancellation of dividend payments by HSBC on the economic situation in Hong Kong and investors' confidence in the stock market; if they have assessed, of the outcome; if not, whether they will make such an assessment?

Reply:

President,

(1) The Government and regulatory authorities (including the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) and the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC)) are aware that some companies, including HSBC Holdings plc (HSBC), have decided to cancel dividend payment recently pursuant to the request of their home regulator. According to HSBC's announcement, the relevant decision was made by its Board having regard to the written notice and request issued by the Bank of England through its Prudential Regulation Authority.

Dividend policy and arrangements of listed companies are commercial

decisions of the respective companies' Board having regard to a range of considerations. Indeed, there were precedents in which listed companies made the decision of dividend cancellation in the past (for example, CT Environmental Group Limited withdrew the payment of 2018 Interim Dividend in 2019). However, the individual circumstances of each company differ and the cases are therefore not comparable. Generally speaking, the dividend arrangements of listed companies should comply with the requirements as stipulated in the company law of their respective jurisdiction of incorporation as well as their articles of association. The Securities and Futures Ordinance and the Listing Rules require listed companies to announce the information about dividend payment and any changes relevant to dividend arrangements in a timely manner in order to uphold the transparency of market information. Whether the cancellation of dividend violates the relevant requirements would depend on individual circumstances and cannot be generalised.

(2) We understand and appreciate that HSBC's decision would have certain impact on shareholders and some of them would feel disappointed and dissatisfied. Banks incorporated in the United Kingdom (including HSBC) are regulated by the Prudential Regulation Authority under the Bank of England and they are required to comply with its relevant requests. It is understood that due to the uncertainties arising from COVID-19, the Prudential Regulation Authority has requested seven large-scale banks, including HSBC, to suspend the payment of dividends in order to strengthen the capital position of the banking system. Similar actions were also taken by the regulatory authorities in Europe. In Hong Kong, the HKMA has requested the Hong Kong branch of HSBC to reflect the concerns expressed by its shareholders in Hong Kong to HSBC. The HKMA has also informed the Prudential Regulation Authority about the concerns expressed by HSBC shareholders in Hong Kong through HKMA's regular regulatory communications with the Prudential Regulation Authority. In addition, the SFC will perform its statutory regulatory functions in accordance with the Securities and Futures Ordinance and take necessary action if any non-compliance with our regulatory requirements is detected or to make any public comment or announcement.

Since the shareholders of listed companies such as HSBC generally come from different jurisdictions and may opt for different dividend options (such as receiving cash dividend or scrip dividend), it is difficult to assess the impact of HSBC's dividend cancellation on the economic situation and investors' confidence in Hong Kong. But on the whole, we believe that the dividend policy and arrangements of individual listed companies would not affect the overall competitiveness of Hong Kong's securities market.