LCQ10: Smart Village Pilots

Following is a question by the Hon Martin Liao and a written reply by the Secretary for Innovation, Technology and Industry, Professor Sun Dong, in the Legislative Council today (November 27):

Question:

The Government published the Smart City Blueprint for Hong Kong 2.0 in 2020, which covers initiatives including the implementation of the Smart Village Pilots (the Pilots). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the Pilots include the provision of telehealth services for the elderly living in remote areas, and the Hospital Authority (HA) has set up "health huts" in some village offices in North District and Islands District where elderly people suffering from chronic diseases may receive remote medical consultations in the villages, and HA has also stated that it will extend such service to as much as 20 to 30 villages in 2024-2025, whether the Government knows (i) the details of and considerations in site selection by HA, (ii) if HA has plans to extend such service to other remote villages, and (iii) if HA has assessed the feasibility of further expanding the target group and scope of the service (i.e. not limiting consultation services to elderly people suffering from chronic diseases); if HA has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as there are views that communication networks are the key infrastructure for building smart villages, and the Government has already been providing free Wi-Fi service at over 150 village premises, whether the authorities will draw up a timetable for further extending free Wi-Fi service to more village premises, and review in a timely manner the quality of the Wi-Fi network operations (e.g. network speed and stability), so as to ensure that the quality of the networks can meet the needs of villagers in using various types of electronic services; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will consider drawing reference from digital cultural tourism projects such as the Cloud Museum of Dunhuang Caves mini programme of the Mainland to further consolidate information on rural tourism in Hong Kong, so as to optimise users' experience; whether it will strengthen inter-sectoral cooperation with the tourism, media and innovation and technology sectors, and make use of innovative technologies such as augmented reality, artificial intelligence, digital interactive technology and 3D modelling, so as to promote the conservation and publicity of rural culture in digital form; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Health Bureau, the Environment and Ecology Bureau, the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau and relevant departments, a consolidated reply in response to the questions raised by the Hon Liao is as follows:

(1) As part of the Government's Smart Village Pilots, the Hospital Authority (HA) has been promoting the provision of telehealth services to suitable patients residing in remote areas, particularly the elderly and individuals with limited mobility, with a view to enhancing patient convenience and service efficiency. The HA will arrange medical and nursing services through telehealth, having taken into account the patient's clinical stability, clinical needs, and operational feasibility. In general, telehealth services are more suitable for chronic patients who are clinically stable, follow-up patients, and those who do not need to visit hospitals to undergo physical examinations.

Patients residing in remote areas who are suitable for telehealth services can receive consultations and follow-up care from doctors through the HA Go mobile application, without visiting hospitals in person. Moreover, the HA will coordinate with some village offices and Rural Committees to provide guidance, facilities and related arrangements for telehealth services for patients in need, including conducting telehealth consultations at the "health huts" established in the area.

At present, the HA's telehealth services are provided in the North District (such as Fanling, Sheung Shui, Sha Tau Kok, and Ta Kwu Ling) and outlying islands (such as Peng Chau, Cheung Chau, Lamma Island, Mui Wo, Tai O, Tap Mun, Ko Lau Wan, Kat O, High Island, Ma Wan and the southern part of Lantau Island), covering around 50 villages and serving approximately 1 200 attendances annually. The HA plans to extend its service to 60 villages by early 2025. The site selection criteria include technical readiness (such as availability of communication devices and network stability) and collaborative arrangements with relevant stakeholders (such as village offices and non-profit organisations).

Besides, the HA has progressively implemented telehealth in suitable healthcare services, including some Specialist Out-patient Clinics, General Out-patient Clinics, Nurse Clinics and Allied Health Clinics, etc. The HA will regularly review the effectiveness of telehealth services with a view to better supporting patients' needs and improving cost-effectiveness.

(2) The Government launched the "Subsidy Scheme to Extend Fibre-based Networks to Villages in Remote Areas" in 2018, with a view to providing financial incentives for the fixed network operators to extend their fibre-based networks to rural and remote areas. At present, fibre-based networks have been rolled out to more than 200 villages. The Government has also provided free public Wi-Fi services at over 150 village premises, which are managed by service providers on a day-to-day basis. Such management includes real-time monitoring and provision of prompt maintenance where necessary in accordance with contract requirements to ensure the normal operation of the Wi-Fi services.

Moreover, the Government consulted the industry in mid-2024 on the "Subsidy Scheme to Extend 5G Coverage in Rural and Remote Areas" and is currently reviewing the feedback received to finalise the arrangement of improving 5G coverage in villages. As for the free public Wi-Fi services, the Government will review from time to time the needs of other village premises not yet covered, technical feasibility and views of local residents before deciding whether to extend the services to more village premises.

(3) The Government is dedicated to promoting smart tourism to enhance the travel experience for visitors so as to strengthen Hong Kong's competitiveness as a premier tourism destination. With regard to rural tourism, we have integrated smart elements into various attractions and tourism projects and made use of smart technology to foster the preservation and promotion of Hong Kong's countryside and nature.

For example, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department launched the "Enjoy Hiking" thematic website (hiking.gov.hk) in 2019 to provide the public with detailed information on hiking routes and attractions. The website compiles and provides information on the features, scenic spots, and transportation of various hiking routes and attractions, making it convenient for the public and visitors to plan hiking activities and experience the natural beauty and cultural history of the countryside. For example, the website introduces the Sheung Yiu Folk Museum at the Pak Tam Chung Nature Trail, various ancient trails within the country parks, etc.

Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark (Hong Kong Geopark) launched the "Same Roots ‧ Same Origins" project in 2017. This initiative preserves village culture by oral history, with innovative technological elements added to enrich visitor experience. Hong Kong Geopark has launched online 3D virtual tours for Geopark communities (including Kau Sai Village and Yim Tin Tsai, as well as story rooms at Lai Chi Wo, Ap Chau, Kat O and Kau Sai Village), and developed the "Our Stories" webpages to feature the oral history of Seven Villages of the Hing Chun Alliance (ourstories.hk) and Kat O (luckyharbour.hk). In addition, the Kat O Heritage Trail was established, allowing visitors to listen to villagers and geopark guides telling stories about the island by scanning the QR code on interpretation panels.

The Countryside Conservation Office (CCO) under the Environment and Ecology Bureau is also establishing Smart Countryside Conservation Trails (CCTs) in Lai Chi Wo and Mui Tsz Lam, and Kuk Po, which are expected to be rolled out gradually in 2025. Similarly, visitors may scan the QR codes on information panels to access audio guides and short videos for an in-depth insight of the stories behind the village attractions. The CCTs will later be enhanced with an application incorporating Augmented Reality for visitors to check-in at relevant points of interest. 3D virtual tour will also be available on the CCO's dedicated website for visitors to explore the CCTs anytime and anywhere.

Moreover, the Tourism Commission incorporated the use of virtual tour technology in various tourism projects. The websites of both "Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival" and "Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival" provide virtual tours with a 360-degree virtual reality function and audio guides to facilitate visitors'

further understanding of the creative concepts of artworks. All the artworks and signage of the two festivals are also provided with QR codes connecting to the websites of the Festivals. One of the artworks displayed at Yim Tin Tsai curated under Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival 2024 also utilises the application of augmented reality to express the emotions and memories of villagers leaving and returning home.

The Government will continue to promote smart tourism in different areas to enhance visitors' experience.