

## LCQ13: Manpower shortage of care sector

Following is a question by the Hon Judy Chan and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

Some members of the care sector have pointed out that the Cambridge Nursing Home and the Bridge of Rehabilitation incidents and the Children's Residential Home incident revealed a serious imbalance in the ratio of care workers to care recipients in residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and residential homes for children in Hong Kong, as well as a serious lack of local labour joining the care sector. Although the sector may currently import labour through the Supplementary Labour Scheme, the manpower shortage situation has shown no improvement. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has assessed the impacts of a prolonged manpower shortage on the service quality of various types of residential care homes (RCHs); if so, of the assessment outcome; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether the Social Welfare Department will formulate the ratios of care workers to care recipients in RCHs based on the services provided by various types of RCHs, and study the enhancements to policies concerning the statutory minimum staffing requirements for various types of RCHs; and

(3) whether it will improve the labour importation regime based on the services provided by various types of RCHs, and consider providing more room for the care sector to recruit care workers from the Mainland; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In 2021, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) collected, through questionnaire, staffing information of front-line care workers in service units (including residential and day service units) from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating subsidised elderly, rehabilitation and family and child welfare services. According to the information provided by the NGOs, as at January 1, 2021, 7 405 personal care workers, 1 663 ward attendants and 1 132 home helpers were employed by these subsidised service units. The vacancy rates of the three said posts were 17.6 per cent, 14.0 per cent and 20.3 per cent respectively. Under the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System, subject to their compliance with the requirements of the Funding and Service Agreements and the statutory staffing requirements, the subvented NGOs may determine their staffing establishments in accordance with their

human resources policies and flexibly deploy resources and employ staff to achieve the service output and effectiveness required.

The prevailing statutory minimum staffing requirements in respect of care workers/ancillary workers/child care workers of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs), child care centres and residential child care centres are set out in Annex. To enhance the quality of RCHEs and RCHDs, the Government plans to introduce an amendment bill into the Legislative Council in the first half of 2022 to amend the Residential Care Homes (Elderly Persons) Ordinance (Cap. 459), the Residential Care Homes (Persons with Disabilities) Ordinance (Cap. 613) and their subsidiary legislation. The legislative proposals include raising the minimum staffing requirements of RCHEs and RCHDs. As for residential child care services, the SWD will conduct a review in 2022-23, including the staffing establishment of these services, so as to keep pace with the long-term development need.

In accordance with the Government's established policy, employers must accord priority to local workers in filling job vacancies. If employers have genuine difficulties in finding suitable staff locally, they may apply to import workers at technician level or below through the Supplementary Labour Scheme (SLS). Currently, private and self-financing RCHEs and RCHDs may apply to import care workers through the SLS. The Government will continue to proactively train and encourage local workers to join the care sector through the Navigation Scheme for Young Persons in Care Services, the "First-Hire-Then-Train" Scheme implemented by the Employees Retraining Board, etc. At the same time, on the premises of safeguarding local employment, consideration will be given to meeting the manpower needs of residential care homes (RCHs) through importation of labour.

To alleviate the grave challenge of manpower shortage in the care sector under the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government has relaxed, on a time-limited basis, certain requirements for the care sector to import care workers through the SLS from March 1 to May 31, 2022. The relaxed requirements include exempting the sector from undergoing four-week local recruitment under the scheme, flexibly approving the number of care workers to be imported having regard to the needs of individual RCHs and suspending the circulation of each application to the Labour Advisory Board for views. Subvented and contract RCHs may also apply for importation of care workers in accordance with the same requirements. As at April 22, the Labour Department (LD) had approved 431 applications involving 2 334 imported care workers.

In early March 2022, the SWD for the first time directly recruited temporary contract care workers with an employment contract period of three months, and received more than 5 500 applications. The several hundred short-term care workers recruited have been assigned in batches to provide assistance at RCHs facing serious manpower shortage. Discounting those who have reported for duty, among the applications received by the SWD, there are nearly 5 000 persons who have indicated interest in working at RCHs but yet to be placed into jobs. In view of this, the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the LD and the SWD are collaborating with the Hong Kong Association of Gerontology to roll out a one-off Special Referral Programme for RCH Care

Workers to refer these job seekers to RCHs with manpower needs. After initial matching, job seekers will be arranged to attend job interviews with the persons in charge of RCHs and receive relevant training, so as to assist RCHs in filling their vacancies as soon as possible.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the manpower situation of the sector and explore suitable enhancement measures.

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## LCQ22: Retail prices of auto-fuels

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

There are views that the continuous rise in the retail prices of auto-fuels (pump prices) in Hong Kong in recent months, coupled with the fluctuating epidemic situation, has caused business difficulties to many trades and industries, and has aggravated the financial burden of members of the public. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that pump prices include (i) land costs of petrol filling station (PFS) sites and (ii) taxes, among other operating costs of oil companies, whether it knows the respective average percentages of these two items in the pump prices in each of the past five years;

(2) as the Consumer Council pointed out in 2020 that although the Government had adjusted its tendering rules for PFS sites and brought in more oil companies since 2000, the conformity of pump prices had increased rather than decreased, and that pump prices in Hong Kong were said to be the highest in the world, whether the Government has examined the causes for such a phenomenon; whether it will commission the Competition Commission to conduct another study on Hong Kong's auto-fuel market, so as to find out if oil companies have set pump prices to be "more going up, less coming down" and "quick going up, slow going down", as well as engaged in "price fixing";

(3) whether it will review the existing tendering system for PFS sites, and examine the re-introduction of lower-priced products of 95 RON petrol;

(4) given that since 2018, the Government has published the tender amounts submitted by unsuccessful tenderers on an anonymous basis after the completion of the transaction procedures in relation to the successful bid under the Land Sale Programme, whether the Government will actively explore adopting such practice in the tendering exercises for PFS sites, with a view to lowering the tender prices of PFS sites and reducing the operating costs

of oil companies;

(5) whether it will require oil companies to disclose more data on their costs and sales, so as to enhance the transparency of the market; whether, in the long run, it will examine the profit structures of oil companies and compare them with those in similar overseas markets, so as to review if the profits of Hong Kong's oil companies are reasonable; and

(6) whether it will consider shifting the policy area of monitoring the auto-fuel market to be under the responsibility of the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, so as to step up protection for consumers' rights and interests?

Reply:

President,

In a free market economy, the prices of auto-fuels in Hong Kong are determined by oil companies having regard to commercial principles and their operating costs, and the Government would not intervene. The role of the Government is to make its best effort to ensure a stable fuel supply, maintain an open market and remove barriers to market entry, and at the same time enhance the transparency of the prices of auto-fuel products so that consumers can make informed choices that suit their needs.

Under the National 14th Five-Year Plan, our country will accelerate the green and low-carbon transformation of the energy structure, increase the proportion of new energy vehicles, and promote electric vehicles and other means of green transport. The Environment Bureau (ENB) published the first Hong Kong Roadmap on Popularisation of Electric Vehicles in March last year. It has set a goal for ending the sale of conventional fuel-propelled private cars, which is to cease the new registration of fuel-propelled private cars covering hybrid vehicles in 2035 or earlier, and at the same time to promote electric vehicles and their associated supporting facilities as a whole.

Our responses to the various parts of the question raised by Hon Elizabeth Quat are set out below:

(1) & (5) The retail prices of auto-fuels depend on a host of factors, including the costs of purchasing imported refined oil products and operating petrol filling stations (PFSs) such as land costs, government rent, tax, staff costs, transportation, operation of oil terminal, hence their adjustments cannot be deduced solely based on international crude oil prices. Generally speaking, in terms of land sale arrangements, PFS sites are largely the same as government land in general as they are also put up for sale through open tender or auction. The successful bid prices reflect the market prices of the PFS sites granted, i.e. the values of these sites and their land use so determined by the market. Records revealed that the average successful bid price of PFS sites increased by around 170 per cent over five years from 2016 to 2020. As for petrol duty, the Government currently does not levy any duty on Euro V diesel, and our fuel duty on unleaded petrol has

been maintained at \$6.06 per litre since 1998. To achieve the goal of carbon neutrality, many overseas places have imposed carbon taxes in recent years, and some places have also increased fuel taxes with a view to reducing the use and number of fuel-propelled vehicles. According to the oil companies, information on their operating costs as well as sales and profits data is considered commercially sensitive and hence not appropriate for disclosure.

The Government has been monitoring the changes in local retail prices of auto-fuels and comparing them with the trend movements of international oil prices (benchmarked against the Singapore free-on-board prices, i.e. Means of Platts Singapore (MOPS), for unleaded petrol and motor vehicle diesel), and publishes these data online on a weekly basis to increase price transparency. According to our observation, the trend movements of local retail prices of auto-fuels and those of MOPS are generally in line over the past year. In addition, oil companies generally provide various kinds of discounts and concessions to customers. According to our understanding, the walk-in discount and the membership card discount offered by some oil companies have increased from \$0.9 per litre in 2019 to a maximum of \$4.6 per litre recently; the number of days on which the special discount is offered has also increased from one day a week to two to four days a week. Therefore, the actual price paid by customers will be usually lower than the pump prices listed at PFSs.

In order to enhance the transparency of prices of auto-fuel products, the ENB has commissioned the Consumer Council to launch the Oil Price Watch website and mobile application for the convenience of customers to obtain more comprehensive discount information and compare prices for making informed choices that suit their needs, thereby enhancing price competition. According to our rough estimate, by leveraging the information available in the Oil Price Watch, drivers using unleaded petrol and diesel could enjoy extra fuel discounts of about \$3.2 per litre and \$2.6 per litre respectively upon each refuelling (see Note 1) in last year, which are equivalent to savings of about 15 per cent of their fuel costs.

(2) Theoretically, market competition can result in similar retail prices among products that are almost homogeneous (e.g. oil products). Auto-fuel prices in Hong Kong are higher than those in neighbouring places for a number of reasons. In addition to factors such as capital investments and operating costs, we have to bear higher costs given the fact that Hong Kong, being a relatively small market with no local oil refinery, has to import all its oil products from other places. With the increasing popularity of electric vehicles, the sales volume of auto-fuels is expected to decline, which would put pressure on the unit operating costs in the medium to long term. However, because local oil companies generally offer various kinds of discounts and concessions to attract customers, the actual price paid by customers is often lower than the retail price and is also often not the same, suggesting that competition does exist in the market. Oil companies have pointed out that, the increase in operating expenditures (including land premiums, the aforementioned discounts and unit cost escalation arising from the decline in sales volume) in recent years is the main reason for the widening spread between import prices and retail prices. Therefore, simply comparing the

changes in retail prices against those in international oil prices may give the public an oversimplified perception that there is "rockets and feathers" pricing or "more going up, less coming down" in auto-fuel prices.

At present, there are six oil companies operating about 180 PFSs in Hong Kong. The number of oil companies in Hong Kong is comparable to those in other major cities in Asia such as Singapore and Seoul, and larger than those in Taipei and Tokyo. Although there are still comments that the number of market players is small and their retail prices on the surface are relatively close, this does not mean that there is collusive pricing or other anti-competitive conduct among the oil companies.

The Competition Commission (the Commission) published a study report on Hong Kong's auto-fuel market in May 2017 to look into petrol prices and costs from 2012 to 2015. The findings of the report revealed that while oil prices were higher in Hong Kong than other places and always the same across companies, these two features could not on their own be taken as hard evidence of anti-competitive conduct.

According to the Competition Ordinance (Cap. 619) (the Ordinance), the Commission is fully empowered to investigate all kinds of anti-competitive conduct. The Commission may conduct an investigation if it has reasonable cause to suspect that a contravention of a competition rule has taken place, and may require, under the Ordinance, any person to provide information or documents and attend before the Commission, etc. The Government will continue to liaise closely with the Commission on the implementation of the Ordinance.

(3) & (4) In order to enhance competition in Hong Kong's auto-fuel market, the Government has adopted a series of measures to encourage and facilitate new operators entering into the market, such as removing the requirement for bidders of PFS sites to hold import licence or supply contract; re-tendering all existing PFS sites upon expiry of their leases instead of renewing the leases of the existing operators; and introducing the super-bid tendering arrangement to facilitate potential new entrants in obtaining a critical mass of PFS sites for economy of scale. Since the introduction of the super-bid arrangements, two new operators have successfully entered the market. The share of the three original major operators, in terms of the number of PFS, has dropped from over 90 per cent to less than 70 per cent, enhancing market competition and operation.

At present, the practice of publishing the tender amounts of unsuccessful bidders on an anonymous basis after completion of the transaction procedures for land sale sites is applicable only to public tenders for residential, commercial and industrial sites. According to the prevailing public tendering arrangements applicable for PFS sites, the Lands Department (LandsD) would announce the details of the tendering results including the name of the successful tenderer and its submitted tender amount, as well as the names and number of other tenderers. Nevertheless, the LandsD would not disclose the tender amount of other tenderers except that of the successful tenderer. Tender documents in the past also did not permit the LandsD to disclose the tender amount unilaterally. Such arrangement has

already taken into account the impact on the tenderers during the competition process. To support the popularisation of electric vehicles and in anticipation of the declining demand in the auto-fuel market, the Government is reviewing PFS sites and formulating the corresponding long-term strategy which includes, among others, to gradually convert some existing petrol or liquefied petroleum gas filling stations to quick charging stations. In arranging for future tendering of PFS sites, we will suitably consider including whether to incorporate the clause of publishing tender amounts of unsuccessful bids on an anonymous basis.

The Commission had recommended the re-introduction of 95 RON petrol with a view to enhancing competition in Hong Kong's auto-fuel market. However, we have reservation on the benefits of the recommendation because the supply of 95 RON petrol, in addition to the existing 98 RON petrol products, by oil companies will make it necessary for them to construct and modify petrol storage tanks and other ancillary facilities at their oil terminals and PFSs, which will incur additional operating and capital costs and thus lead to higher petrol prices instead. Besides, it may not be technically feasible to install additional underground petrol storage tank(s) and ancillary facilities at some PFSs owing to site constraints (e.g. limited underground space), and hence the number of petrol products provided at individual PFSs may not increase. Taking into account the points mentioned above and the anticipated developments of electric vehicles and alternative fuel vehicles, the Government indicated in its response to the Commission's report in 2018 that it would not introduce the requirement of supplying 95 RON petrol at PFSs.

(6) At present, ENB is responsible for energy policies, objectives of which are to ensure that energy needs of the community are met safely, reliably and efficiently at reasonable prices; minimise the environmental impact of energy production and use; and promote the efficient use and conservation of energy. In facing changes to the future development of the auto-fuel market, we will review the situation of existing PFS sites and closely monitor the progress of popularisation of electric vehicles as well as its impact on the auto-fuel market. Meanwhile, we will keep up our efforts in ensuring stable fuel supply, enhancing the transparency of the prices of fuel products and promoting competition.

Note 1: The calculation is based on the difference between the highest and the lowest walk-in discounts offered by respective oil companies on the last day of each month during April 2021 to March 2022. The difference as a percentage of the average retail price during the aforesaid period is then computed. The designated membership discounts, credit card discounts, membership card discounts, etc. offered by each oil company are not included.

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## LCQ7: Government's anti-epidemic preparedness and response plan

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Siu-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

Paragraph 27 of the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Response Plan) published by the Government in January 2020 sets out that: "All relevant Government bureaux and departments are advised to draw up contingency plans in response to novel infection to ensure coordinated responses and essential services in the Government and in major business sectors. All relevant bureaux and departments should also periodically conduct exercises and revise related contingency plans. The Department of Health will maintain close networking with private hospitals, professional medical organisations and other non-governmental organisations to mobilise community resources when needed". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Food and Health Bureau, the Department of Health (DH) and its Centre for Health Protection have regularly conducted drills and revised their contingency plans since publication of the Response Plan; if so, of the details;

(2) of the details of the DH's networking and communications with private hospitals and professional medical organisations since publication of the Response Plan, and whether the DH has discussed with them how public and private hospitals should co-operate in combating an epidemic upon activation of the Emergency Response Level under the Response Plan (if the DH has, of the details); and

(3) as it has been reported that the fifth wave of the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic broke out in January this year, but it was not until early March that some private hospitals began to admit this kind of patients, and the arrangements were only interim measures, whether the Government has enhanced the regular co-operation mechanism between public and private hospitals under the Response Plan, so that upon activation of the Emergency Response Level, private hospitals will be able to share the work of public hospitals more effectively and tackle the crisis jointly; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to Hong Kong's healthcare

system. The healthcare profession from both the public and private sectors have taken on the responsibility to fight against the epidemic with a view to safeguarding the public's health. With the full co-operation of various sectors in society, the fifth wave of the epidemic has gradually stabilised, enabling us to adjust various restrictive measures in phases from late April as planned to get society back to normal in an orderly manner. Although the epidemic situation continues to stabilise, we will steadfastly take forward the strategies of guarding against the importation of cases and the resurgence of domestic infections to achieve the greatest anti-epidemic effect.

In consultation with the Hospital Authority (HA), my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan is as follows:

(1) To enhance the overall preparedness and response for communicable diseases with public health significance, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has developed contingency plans and conducted drills to test the capability of relevant government departments and relevant organisations in coping with possible major outbreaks of infectious diseases and public health emergencies, as well as to enhance the awareness and the capability of the community and healthcare personnel. Since the promulgation of the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Plan) on January 4, 2020, the HKSAR Government has from time to time adjusted and prepared response arrangement through reviewing anti-epidemic measures and conducting drills. For example, in response to the gradual resumption of face-to-face classes in all schools from April 19, 2022, apart from issuing guidelines to schools and taking additional measures (including the compulsory requirement of conducting rapid antigen tests daily by teaching staff and students), the Department of Health (DH), the HA and the Education Bureau conducted drills before the resumption of face-to-face classes in mid-April 2022 to prepare for any outbreaks in schools. In addition, the Centre for Health Protection of the DH, together with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and the Centre for Food Safety of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, participated in the annual International Health Regulations Exercise Crystal organised by the World Health Organization's Regional Office for the Western Pacific in December 2021. The simulated scenario of the exercise involved a new virus having been detected with pandemic potential against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic ongoing around the world. The experience gained from these exercises enhanced communications among relevant parties and strengthened their capability to adjust and map out more targeted and refined strategies and measures (including the arrangements under the Plan).

(2) and (3) According to the Plan announced by the Government in 2020, the HA will take contingency measures in the provision of medical services such as reducing non-urgent and non-emergency services where necessary and discussing with private hospitals on patients' transfer/diversion. Details of the contingency measures are as follows:

The HA has timely adjusted its non-emergency and non-essential medical

services in response to the different stages of development of the COVID-19 epidemic since early 2020. To tie in with such service adjustments, the HA has expanded the service scope of some of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) programmes, including the expansion of the service group of the Project on Enhancing Radiological Investigation Services through Collaboration with the Private Sector to cover all eligible cancer patients, increasing the service quota of the Haemodialysis PPP Programme, as well as extending the Colon Assessment PPP Programme to cover colonoscopy cases delayed due to the epidemic. Furthermore, the HA has launched emergency PPP Programmes to deliver services such as orthopaedic surgery, cystoscopy, gastroscopy and breast cancer surgery, so that affected patients can be treated as early as possible.

Since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic in late December 2021, there is an upsurge in the demand for public hospital beds. Apart from further increasing the service quotas of the various PPP programmes, the HA has also re-activated some of the emergency PPP programmes, such as the Oesophago-gastro-duodenoscopy Collaboration Programme. To address the demand for hospital beds, the HA has specifically referred its patients to private hospitals for treatment through the low-charge bed mechanism established with two private hospitals and a new partnership programme with private hospitals implemented with the help of the Government.

Besides, the HA has established a Tele-health Hub where about 50 private doctors or retired doctors participating in a locum scheme take turns to provide services. The Hub is operated seven days a week to render support to confirmed COVID-19 patients who are undergoing isolation in the community and to provide infection control guidelines and tele-health advice for help seekers and their family. The Government has also commissioned the HA to undergo strategic purchasing with private healthcare institutions in order to provide medical support for users at community isolation facilities.

In view of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government met with representatives from private hospitals on March 8, 2022 and appealed to the private hospitals in supporting the anti-epidemic efforts. Apart from providing more hospital beds for receiving patients referred by the HA, private hospitals were suggested to offer medical support to COVID-19 patients through various means (including participating in the operation of holding centres for the elderly, providing outpatient or telemedicine services for COVID-19 patients etc.) in order to alleviate the immense pressure faced by public hospitals.

Moreover, a meeting was held on March 9, 2022 with representatives of the medical and health sector, including healthcare professional bodies, via video conferencing to enlist their all out efforts in mobilising healthcare professionals within a short period of time to support the government's various epidemic containment measures. Currently, about 780 healthcare professionals have signed up to take part in various anti-epidemic work, which includes providing medical support to community isolation facilities, joining the HA's anti-epidemic team and assisting in speeding up COVID-19 vaccination.

In view of the phased resumption of face-to-face classes in primary and secondary schools as well as kindergartens from late April, a meeting with representatives of the medical and health sector from various healthcare professional bodies, medical organisations and medical institutions was held again on April 14 to appeal to the private healthcare sector to continue to unite in the fight against the epidemic and help treat COVID-19 patients, so as to cope with the possible rebound in the number of COVID 19 confirmed cases after the resumption of face-to-face classes.

Although the current fifth wave of the epidemic is on the wane, the Government and the HA will keep staying on guard and proactively prepare for the possible outbreak of the next wave by drawing reference from the experience gained in the fifth wave. Leveraging on the experience of the previous co-operation with the private healthcare sector, as well as the platform built on active communication, the HA, having regard to the development of the epidemic, can make appropriate adjustments to the various PPP programmes, consider enhancing or extending the regularised PPP programmes, re-activate programmes which have been completed, or even introduce new PPP initiatives.

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## LCQ1: Community Isolation Facility Hotel Scheme

Following is a question by the Hon Alice Mak and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

To cope with the fifth wave of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Government has earlier on launched the Community Isolation Facility Hotel Scheme (the Scheme), under which participating hotels are designated for community isolation facility (CIF) purpose. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the average and weekly utilisation rates of each CIF hotel;
- (2) of the average, lowest and highest market room rates of the CIF hotels;
- (3) of the expenses involved in renting hotel rooms, with a breakdown by name of hotel;
- (4) of the expected occupancy rate of the Scheme, and whether the actual occupancy rate has reached the expected level; if not, of the reasons for

that; and

(5) as it is reported that some long-stay guests have been affected as a result of the relevant hotels participating in the Scheme, of the number of requests for assistance received by the Government, and the measures taken to assist such guests?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Security Bureau, the reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Alice Mak is as follows:

In light of the fifth wave of COVID-19, the Government will, depending on the health risk, care needs and transmission risk in the household, make arrangements for infected persons according to the multi-tiered triage and treatment strategy for suitable treatment and isolation. Those asymptomatic persons who do not require medical support but have to be isolated somewhere other than their household due to their care needs or household environment will be admitted to community isolation facilities (CIFs) to reduce the risk of transmission.

In response to the substantial increase of confirmed cases in early February this year, the Government has been making every effort to increase the supply of CIFs in various ways to meet the demand, including engaging commercial hotels and inviting the hotel industry to participate actively. According to the CIF Hotel Scheme, if the participating hotel provides hardware facilities without staffing support in the operation, the Government will use the hotel at a rate of \$1,000 per room per night; if the participating hotel fully assists in the operation, including the provision of hardware facilities and staffing support, etc, the Government will pay at the rate of \$1,600 per room per night.

The occupancy rate of hotels that are used as CIF is subject to various factors, including changes in the epidemic situation. Individual hotels have once recorded occupancy rate of over 90 per cent. As of April 25, the CIF hotels have admitted over 14 000 persons in total for isolation. In view of the rapid development of the epidemic, the occupancy rate of CIF hotels at a particular moment cannot accurately reflect the actual situation.

Having regard to the utilisation of CIFs, the Government has made timely adjustment to redeploy CIF hotels for other appropriate uses, such as dormitory for Mainland medical support team, dormitory for staff of Hospital Authority and staff of residential care homes for the elderly during the epidemic, and designated quarantine hotel, etc. The overall expenditure for the Government to engage hotels as CIFs depends on the development of the epidemic and the actual situation. As the epidemic has not yet come to an end, the specific amount of the expenditure involved cannot be provided at this stage.

The Government received a few requests for assistance from some guests staying with hotels on a long term basis as the hotels were being turned into CIFs. As the matter involved the tenancy relationship between the hotels and their guests, the Government did not have a direct role to play. The Government understands that the hotels interested in participating as CIF have already made reasonable arrangements for their original guests.

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## LCQ19: Warning services of Hong Kong Observatory

Following is a question by the Hon Yang Wing-kit and a written reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

It is learnt that at around 2.30am on March 14 this year, many members of the public reported to the Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) that they felt an earth tremor, but it was only after a certain period of time that the HKO released on its online platform the news about an earthquake of magnitude 4.1 which had occurred near the coast of south-eastern China. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the staffing establishment of the Forecasting and Warning Services Branch of the HKO and, in respect of its officers working on shifts on a round-the-clock basis, their numbers and work arrangements in times of normal operation and during the epidemic respectively;

(2) of the current locations across the territory where the HKO has set up seismic sensors, and the total number of such sensors; whether such sensors are capable of accurately monitoring and detecting seismic activities in Hong Kong and neighbouring areas; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) as it is learnt that the HKO will analyse cases of earth tremors felt in Hong Kong, of the time required for the basic analysis as well as compilation and dissemination of earthquake information; and

(4) of the circumstances under which the HKO will, through the Emergency Alert System, send emergency alert messages about extreme weather, natural disasters or radiation leaks to members of the public?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Security Bureau, our reply to the question raised by the Hon Yang Wing-kit is as follows:

(1) The Forecasting and Warning Services Branch of the Hong Kong Observatory (HKO) is mainly responsible for providing weather forecasting service and issuing warnings on inclement weather. The branch currently has an establishment of about 80 staff. The Central Forecasting Office under the branch is responsible for monitoring weather, issuing weather reports, forecasts and warnings, as well as disseminating information on the occurrence of earthquake and tsunami to the public. The Central Forecasting Office operates round-the-clock and its staff are arranged to work in three shifts per day, with seven staff per shift. The shift arrangement has been maintained throughout the epidemic over the past two years or so to ensure the aforementioned weather forecasting and emergency services are unaffected.

(2) The HKO currently monitors distant and nearby earthquake activities by broadband and short-period seismographs respectively. Two broadband seismographs are installed at Po Shan Road on Hong Kong Island and the HKO Headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui to effectively monitor earthquakes as far as about 8 000 kilometres away, whilst seven short-period seismographs are installed at Cape D'Aguilar, Cheung Chau, Keung Shan, Lead Mine Pass, Luk Keng, Tsim Bei Tsui and Yuen Ng Fan to mainly monitor earthquakes within about 200 kilometres of Hong Kong.

The HKO also assesses the impacts of earthquakes on Hong Kong by five strong motion accelerographs at Po Shan Road on Hong Kong Island, the HKO Headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui, Lead Mine Pass, Tsim Bei Tsui and Yuen Ng Fan. In addition to the seismographic network in Hong Kong, the HKO also receives real-time raw seismic data from the global seismographic network, with about 480 broadband seismographs around the world, for monitoring global earthquake activities and their possible impacts on Hong Kong. The broadband seismograph at Po Shan Road is one of the broadband seismographs in the global seismographic network.

(3) The HKO receives real-time data from local and global seismographic networks, and can calculate parameters of an earthquake, including its origin time, magnitude (i.e. amount of energy released from the earthquake source, usually presented on the Richter Scale) and epicentre location, within around 10 minutes upon its occurrence. For all global earthquakes reaching magnitude 5.0 or above, the HKO will disseminate information of the earthquakes through issuing "Quick Earthquake Messages" on its website and social media pages.

In the event of a locally felt earth tremor in Hong Kong, the HKO will also immediately analyse data from the seismographic networks and reports from the public (including information on the extent and duration of the felt vibration and spatial distribution of the reports) to determine the earthquake's local intensity (i.e. impacts of vibration on individuals, furniture, buildings and geological structures, etc, usually presented on the Modified Mercalli Scale). Such analysis is usually completed within an hour upon earthquake occurrence, after which the HKO will immediately issue a

"Locally Felt Earth Tremor Report" through channels including the HKO website, mobile weather application "MyObservatory", social media pages and the Government News and Media Information System. The report covers the origin time, magnitude, epicentre location, and local intensity of the earthquake, as well as the number of reports received from the public, etc.

Regarding the earthquake mentioned in the question, it occurred at 2.29am on March 14 this year. The HKO issued a report at 2.40am on the same day through its website and social media pages etc, indicating that reports of felt earth tremor were received from the public and analysis was underway. Later at 3.16am (i.e. 47 minutes after the earthquake occurred), the HKO issued a "Locally Felt Earth Tremor Report" which contained information about the earthquake.

(4) The HKO currently disseminates messages including weather warnings and special weather tips to the public through multiple channels, such as the HKO website, "MyObservatory", social media pages, the Government News and Media Information System and the mass media. The HKO maintains close communication with relevant bureaux in respect of extreme weather, natural disasters or incidents of radioactive release, and will consider disseminating messages through the Emergency Alert System on emergency situations in Hong Kong, such as severe hazards arising from super typhoons, severe tsunamis or serious nuclear accidents at the Daya Bay Nuclear Power Station, to alert the public of appropriate precautions and emergency response actions, having regard to the specific circumstances of the events, including their severity, urgency and potential public impacts.