

LCQ3: Improving policy implementation

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Christopher Hui, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

Last year, the Government injected \$27.3 billion into Cathay Pacific Airways Limited (CX) which had fallen into financial difficulty, and later disbursed around \$0.6 billion of wage subsidies to CX under the Employment Support Scheme. However, CX still recorded a record-breaking deficit of \$21.6 billion and needed to reduce approximately 8 500 positions last year. Some members of the public have criticized that the public money involved in the injection is sufficient for handing out \$5,000 each to all members of the public in Hong Kong, or making contributions to Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) schemes on behalf of all employers and employees in Hong Kong for half a year. There have been comments that the Government has made policy blunders, such as disbursing wage subsidies to supermarket chains whose business has bloomed amid the epidemic, reducing tax concessions for the current financial year by half, proposing to issue electronic consumption vouchers with all sorts of restrictions, refusing to allow members of the public to withdraw the accrued benefits in their MPF accounts to help themselves, and failing to publish vaccination guidelines in a timely manner, which have resulted in the Government's persistently low popularity. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has reviewed if the Government's practice of spending, without consulting the public, huge amounts of public money on injecting money into CX and disbursing wage subsidies to supermarket chains with huge profits but ignoring that more and more members of the public have fallen into financial difficulty amid the epidemic, will give members of the public a perception of not helping those who should be helped, and deal a blow to public confidence in the Government's governance;

(2) as it is learnt that the level of Mainlanders' satisfaction with the Central Government has remained persistently high in recent years, whether it has studied which of the relevant reasons are of reference value to the SAR Government to facilitate its review and adjustment of the existing policies on developing the economy and combating the epidemic; and

(3) whether it will change the practice of helping individual enterprises and instead adopt a fairer and more cost-effective approach for assisting all enterprises and employees who have fallen into financial difficulty, such as considering afresh the proposal of the Government making contributions to MPF schemes temporarily on behalf of all employers and employees in Hong Kong, so as to ensure the proper use of public money?

Reply:

President,

First of all, I am thankful for the opportunity of responding to the oral question raised by the Hon Paul Tse today to elucidate the Government's efforts in alleviating people's hardship, supporting the enterprises and fighting against the pandemic in the past months. In consultation with relevant policy bureaux, my reply to the various parts of the question raised is as follows:

(1) and (3) Same as other economies, the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a very severe blow to the Hong Kong economy. We have been committed to controlling the pandemic, and at the same time endeavoured to help those hard-hit business sectors and citizens to tide over the difficult times having regard to the epidemic situation and changes in the economic environment.

Considering that job security of employees and business operation are inter-dependent, we have been steadfast in supporting both the enterprises and employment. To this end, the Government has introduced targeted relief measures amounting to over \$300 billion, through the 2020-21 Budget and the four rounds of injections into the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF), that covered a wide range of industries and groups in need. As at mid-March 2021, over \$140 billion of subsidies have been disbursed under the AEF, benefitting over 6.5 million persons and around 850 000 applications submitted by enterprises and businesses. On the premise that no layoffs were allowed, employers had been subsidised by the two tranches of the Employment Support Scheme to the benefit of around 1.95 million employees and over 120 000 self-employed persons.

The aviation industry plays a strategic role in the economic development of Hong Kong, and is the cornerstone of Hong Kong's status as an international aviation hub. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cathay Pacific Airways Limited (Cathay) accounted for 57 per cent and 41 per cent of the overall passengers and freight carried by the Hong Kong International Airport respectively. Cathay is key in driving different types of economic activities within the industry, supporting many in the downstream and providing job opportunities. With a view to supporting Hong Kong's aviation industry to ride out the storm, the Government decided in June 2020 to invest in Cathay in the public interest.

At the individual level, the Government has spared no efforts to relieve people's hardship. The Budget announced by the Financial Secretary in February 2021 introduced a host of counter-cyclical measures costing over \$120 billion. Apart from general measures including tax and rate reductions, increasing social security allowance and provision of one-off electricity charges subsidy of \$1,000, the Budget also proposed to issue electronic consumption vouchers with a total value of \$5,000 and create around 30 000 time-limited job positions. In addition, the Budget proposes to set up a time-limited Special 100% Loan Guarantee for Individuals Scheme, with a view to providing an additional financing option for the unemployed.

Regarding the suggestion for the Government to make Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) contributions, we announced in January 2020 to pay in future the five percent MPF contributions on behalf of employees whose salary is lower than the minimum relevant income level. As for the Hon Tse's suggestion for the Government to make MPF contributions for all employers and employees in Hong Kong, this is a measure with much wider implication. The Government has carefully analysed the impact of the proposal. Given the finite public resources, we consider it not appropriate to implement the suggestion.

We forecast that the consolidated deficit this year will be the highest on record, and the deficit in the coming year will remain high at around \$100 billion. In the coming years, we expect great volatility in the economic environment and the external political situation. While we will strive to make available mitigation measures for our people, we also need to maintain certain level of fiscal reserves for meeting other future needs.

(2) The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has remained vigilant and committed to curbing the COVID-19 pandemic. We have made references to the advice from experts in Hong Kong, the Mainland and the rest of the world in formulating suitable anti-epidemic strategy based on science. There are regular exchanges between the Department of Health of the HKSAR Government and the National Health Commission on the anti-epidemic experience in the Mainland. By drawing on the Mainland's successful anti-epidemic strategy and experience, it is hoped that the epidemic in Hong Kong could be put under control as soon as possible.

Over the past year, our country has achieved major strategic achievement in curbing COVID-19 and is the world's only major economy to achieve positive economic growth. Meanwhile, the approved 14th Five-Year Plan (Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035) sets out the blueprint and action agenda for the social and economic development of the country in the next five years. Hong Kong will be a proactive participant and facilitator of the development blueprint, thereby bringing continuous impetus to our economy.

To enhance governance capability, which is also the topic that the Hon Paul Tse concerns, it is pivotal for the HKSAR to dutifully implement the decision of the National People's Congress to improve the electoral system and the principle of "patriots administering Hong Kong". Once the loophole in our current electoral system is plugged, we can effectively resolve the predicament of over-politicisation as seen in the Legislative Council (LegCo) in recent years. Taking the recent resolution of the Vote on Account as an example, this is a well-established procedure in the budgetary process. Whilst we welcome Members' views during the deliberation of the resolution, the process was delayed by a number of unreasonable amendments last year. In recent times when rationality is restored in the LegCo, the resolution this year was passed smoothly as in the past. We hope that once the electoral system is improved and "patriots administering Hong Kong" is implemented, there will be larger room for cooperation with the LegCo and different sectors of the community to develop the economy and improve people's

livelihood.

Thank you, President.

[LCQ20: Making inquiries to registered voters](#)

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a written reply by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Erick Tsang Kwok-wai, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

The Electoral Affairs Commission (Registration of Electors) (Legislative Council Geographical Constituencies) (District Council Constituencies) Regulation (Cap. 541A) provides that the Electoral Registration Officer may issue inquiry letters to persons registered in an existing final register of electors (register), and remove from the new register the voter registration (VR) of persons who have failed to make a valid reply by a specified deadline. It is learnt that a new VR cycle has commenced. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the total number of registered voters, in the last VR cycle and since the commencement of the current VR cycle, who failed to reply to the inquiry letters by the specified deadline; whether the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) knows the reasons concerned;

(2) whether REO has, apart from issuing inquiry letters, confirmed the registered particulars, such as the principal residential addresses, of registered voters by means of making telephone calls, sending emails and paying home visits, etc. during the last VR cycle and since the commencement of the current VR cycle; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether measures are in place to ensure that the VR of registered voters, who are absent from Hong Kong for reasons such as the epidemic, will not be removed due to their failure to reply to the inquiry letters in time; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

To ensure the accuracy and completeness of the voter registration (VR) particulars, the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) implements a series

of checking measures in each VR cycle, including follow-up inquiries on undelivered poll cards arising from elections; cross-matching of the residential addresses of electors with the Housing Department, the Hong Kong Housing Society, the Home Affairs Department and the Immigration Department; checks on residential addresses with multiple electors or multiple surnames of electors; random sample checks on registered and newly registered electors; checks on addresses with incomplete information or suspected non-residential addresses; and checks on addresses situated at buildings already demolished or vacant buildings to be demolished. After implementing or following up with the checking measures, if the REO has reasonable grounds to suspect that the registered residential addresses might not be the only or principal residence of certain electors, it will issue inquiry letters to the electors concerned, requesting them to confirm or update their registered addresses. If the electors concerned fail to reply or provide the necessary information by the deadline, the REO will, in accordance with the relevant statutory procedures, enter the said electors into the omissions list.

With regard to the Hon Chan Han-pan's question, our reply is as follows:

(1) In the 2020 VR cycle, the number of electors who were omitted from the 2020 final register due to failure to respond to inquiry letters by the statutory deadline was 47 084. In fact, in the 2020 VR cycle, the response rate of electors to inquiry letters was around 51 per cent, similar to that in 2019 (which was 50 per cent), suggesting that no irregularities occurred in the response rate towards inquiry letters in the 2020 VR cycle. As for the 2021 VR cycle which is still ongoing, REO is issuing inquiry letters progressively, with the statutory deadline for electors to respond to such inquiry letters on May 2, 2021. As such, the relevant response rates are not yet available.

REO issues inquiry letters to the electors when REO has reasonable doubts having regard to the results from implementing or following up with the checking measures. The outcome of the checking exercise shows that the inaccuracies detected in respect of registered residential addresses are mostly because of the failure on the part of electors to update their registered residential addresses with the REO in a timely manner after moving home, which has led to such electors not responding to the inquiry letters issued to them.

(2) and (3) We have all along adopted various means to remind and facilitate electors included in the inquiry process to respond to the inquiry letters in a timely manner. This includes featuring the relevant messages in the VR Campaigns and disseminating them through different channels, such as broadcasting Announcements in the Public Interest on television and radio, placing online advertisements on websites, online newspapers and mobile applications, as well as displaying posters, banners, lamppost buntings and advertisements at public transport.

Moreover, after issuing the inquiry letters, REO will actively contact the electors who have been included in the inquiry process via all of the available contact methods (e.g. telephone, SMS, email and fax) as provided by

the electors during their registration, so as to remind them to respond to the inquiry letters by the statutory deadline. If REO becomes aware that an elector affected by the epidemic and relevant matters is unable to return to Hong Kong in time to handle his VR matters, the REO would, as far as practicable, make suitable arrangements to bring the inquiry letters to his attention and to facilitate his reply, such as by sending an electronic copy of the said inquiry letter to the elector concerned via email. Electors included in the inquiry process may respond to the REO by post, email or fax.

If an elector has been entered into the omissions list due to failure to respond to the inquiry letters by the statutory deadline, REO will separately issue reminder letters stamped with the message "Immediate action required. Your voting right is at stake." to such electors. REO will also attempt to contact these electors as far as practicable according to the contact information available, so as to remind them to respond or to lodge a claim by the statutory deadline, for the consideration and approval of the Revising Officer to maintain their voter registration.

During both the 2020 and 2021 VR cycles, we have, in the manner described above, publicised the VR Campaign and put in place arrangements to facilitate electors in responding to inquiry letters.

LCQ6: Patients waiting at accident and emergency departments for transfer to wards

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

Some members of the public have relayed that some patients in need of hospitalisation for further treatments after receiving diagnoses and treatments at the accident and emergency (A&E) departments of public hospitals needed to wait for quite a long time before they were transferred to the wards. Recently, a patient even died while he was waiting at the A&E department for transfer to the ward. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council if it knows:

(1) in respect of the patients who were admitted to the public hospitals via the A&E departments last year, the average time for which they had waited before they were transferred to the wards after completing the registration procedure at the A&E registries, with a breakdown by the triage category to

which the patients belonged;

(2) whether the Hospital Authority (HA) will take new measures to shorten the time for which patients wait at the A&E departments for transfer to the wards; if HA will, of the target waiting time; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether HA will deploy healthcare personnel to regularly monitor the conditions of those patients who are waiting at the A&E departments for transfer to the wards, so as to ensure that they receive appropriate care; if HA will, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan is as follows:

(1) The Hospital Authority (HA) adopts a triage system in its accident and emergency (A&E) departments, under which priorities for treatment are set according to the severity and nature of patients' medical conditions, so as to ensure that timely A&E services are provided to those with urgent needs. When patients attend the A&E departments, an experienced and specially trained triage nurse will first assess their conditions, with priority for treatment to be given to emergency cases. Patients are classified into five categories based on their clinical conditions, namely Triage Category I (critical), Triage Category II (emergency), Triage Category III (urgent), Triage Category IV (semi-urgent) and Triage Category V (non-urgent).

HA has set performance pledges to ensure that patients who need urgent medical attention are treated within a reasonable time. Patients triaged as critical will be treated immediately by healthcare staff without having to wait, while those with non-urgent conditions may have to wait longer. Healthcare staff of A&E departments would arrange admission of patients for further treatment and care according to their individual conditions as necessary. In 2019-20, the average waiting time for admission of A&E patients after diagnoses was about 67 minutes. HA does not maintain breakdown of the average waiting time for admission of A&E patients by triage category.

(2) Apart from adopting the triage system to ensure that patients in emergency condition would receive timely and appropriate treatment, HA is also committed to improving the overall quality of A&E services by implementing various measures, including increasing manpower of doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and supporting staff in A&E departments, as well as further augmenting A&E manpower through the provision of special honorarium and leave encashment. HA has also launched the A&E Support Session Programme with a view to recruiting additional healthcare staff to assist doctors and nurses in A&E departments in handling urgent, semi-urgent and non-urgent cases. Besides, public hospitals have enhanced geriatric support

to A&E departments and set up additional observation areas in A&E departments to reduce avoidable hospitalisation.

Furthermore, to shorten the waiting time of A&E patients for admission to hospital wards, HA has adopted various strategies and measures to enhance service capacity and expedite the turnover of hospital beds. Specific measures include:

- (1) continuing to provide additional beds for existing and newly built public hospitals through HA's Annual Plan. For 2021-22, HA has planned to open a total of 323 additional beds in public hospitals;
- (2) flexibly deploying beds and providing more temporary beds in wards having regard to operational and clinical service needs;
- (3) reprioritising core activities such as reducing elective admissions so as to reserve capacity for meeting demand for emergency admissions via A&E departments;
- (4) deploying additional healthcare and supporting staff to expedite the turnover of hospital beds and ease prolonged waiting;
- (5) transferring stable patients from acute hospital to convalescent hospital in the cluster, and enhancing ward rounds by senior clinicians and relevant support services during evenings, weekends and public holidays, as well as strengthening support to patients upon discharge from hospitals to facilitate early discharge of recovered patients; and
- (6) continuing to collaborate with two private hospitals with low-charge hospital beds during the winter surge period to arrange suitable patients, who are willing to be transferred, to complete their treatment at these private hospitals.

HA will continue to closely monitor the utilisation of beds in public hospitals, review the above measures in a timely manner, and make flexible arrangements and deployment of resources as appropriate to shorten the waiting time of A&E patients for hospital admission.

(3) In general, healthcare staff of A&E departments will arrange patients awaiting hospital admission to wait in the designated waiting area or on stretchers. They will also regularly attend to these patients and measure their vital signs or arrange doctors to review their conditions as necessary. Doctors will prescribe drugs or arrange appropriate examinations (e.g. electrocardiogram, blood glucose test and X-ray examination) according to the patients' conditions, whereas nurses will provide appropriate care based on patients' needs. Family members are encouraged to accompany the patients where possible, and maintain communication with the healthcare staff while waiting in the A&E departments to ensure appropriate assistance could be given to the patients.

Effective Exchange Rate Index

The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Wednesday, March 24, 2021 is 101.7 (up 0.3 against yesterday's index).

LCQ2: Extension of fibre-based networks to remote areas

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Lau and a reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, in the Legislative Council today (March 24):

Question:

The Government launched the Subsidy Scheme to Extend Fibre-based Networks to Villages in Remote Areas (Subsidy Scheme) in 2018 to subsidise fixed network operators (FNOs) to extend fibre-based networks to 235 selected villages located in remote areas, so that the villagers therein can enjoy broadband services of speed of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows, among the villages covered by the Subsidy Scheme, the names of those villages for which the works to roll out fibre-based lead-in connections have been completed by now, as well as the respective expected completion time of such works for the remaining villages;

(2) given that the selected FNOs are only subsidised to roll out fibre-based lead-in connections to the entrances of the villages, and the villagers need to negotiate with service providers on their own the roll-out of fibre-based networks within their villages, whether the Government has measures in place to assist the villagers in overcoming the relevant difficulties, so that they, just like residents in the urban areas, can enjoy fibre-to-the-home broadband services; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) of the villages with a broadband speed not reaching 25 Mbps but not yet covered by the Subsidy Scheme at present; the measures that the Government has put in place to enable the villagers of such villages to enjoy broadband services with a higher speed?

Reply:

President,

In the past, many remote villages in the New Territories and outlying islands were not covered by fibre-based networks and could only rely on copper-based networks for basic telecommunications services with unsatisfactory Internet access speed. A policy breakthrough was made in 2017 when the Government decided to subsidise the laying of fibre-based cables for those remote villages with a reasonable number of residents. Subsequently, we obtained the approval of the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in 2018 for a funding of \$774.4 million to implement the Subsidy Scheme to Extend Fibre-based Networks to Villages in Remote Areas (Subsidy Scheme). The Subsidy Scheme aims to provide financial incentives for telecommunications operators to extend their fibre-based networks to remote villages in order to provide residents with better broadband services.

After securing the funding, six fixed network operators (FNOs) selected through tender are laying and extending the fibre-based networks in phases. The entire project will benefit 235 villages in remote areas and about 110 000 villagers. The laying of fibre-based networks for about half of the villages is expected to be completed by 2022-23, and the rest by 2025-26. A list of the villages covered by the Subsidy Scheme is at Annex.

The Subsidy Scheme aims to subsidise selected FNOs to extend their fibre-based networks to the entrances of eligible villages, so that the FNOs are in a position to make use of the subsidised fibre-based cables to lay their networks within the villages.

As regards fibre-to-the-home, since the wiring and installation works will involve private land and properties, they could only proceed when the relevant owners have reached a commercial agreement with the FNO. This arrangement is the same as for subscribers in urban areas.

The Subsidy Scheme requires participating FNOs to open up at least half of the capacity of the subsidised network facilities for free use by other FNOs. In other words, other FNOs can share the use of the subsidised network facilities and provide broadband services to the villages concerned, thereby providing villagers with more choices of suitable broadband services.

With the implementation of the Subsidy Scheme, connection to fibre-based network would be made available to over 200 villages which previously did not have such a service. Notwithstanding, some remotely located or sparsely populated areas, including some islands without sufficient electricity supply to support the operation of telecommunication facilities, are not included in the Scheme.