

LCQ9: National security education

Following is a question by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

The Education Bureau (EDB) issued circulars to schools across the territory on the 4th of last month to provide guidelines on school administration and education in respect of safeguarding national security. In addition, the EDB has compiled the Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong (the Framework) to assist schools in implementing national security education. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the EDB has added a three-hour "Supplement: National Security" on top of the existing 15-hour standalone module on "Constitution and the Basic Law" at the junior secondary level in order to support schools to implement national security education, whether the EDB will review, in a timely manner, the effectiveness of such arrangement and the need to increase relevant lesson time;

(2) whether it will, by drawing reference from the practice of disbursing to schools the Moral and National Education Support Grant, disburse to schools a "national security education support grant", so that schools can have more resources to implement national security education;

(3) as the Framework provides that the learning elements at the junior primary level include letting students know the names of the four offences regulated by the National Security Law for Hong Kong, how the EDB assists junior primary students in comprehending the complicated concepts involved in the offences concerned, and assesses their learning effectiveness;

(4) of the measures in place to ensure that teachers receive adequate training on the knowledge needed for teaching the National Security Law for Hong Kong; and

(5) whether it has plans to arrange for Mainland teachers to come, after the epidemic has subsided, to Hong Kong to share their experience of teaching knowledge about national security?

Reply:

President,

Upon the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL), the Education Bureau (EDB) issued EDB Circular No. 3/2021 "National Security: Maintaining a Safe Learning Environment Nurturing Good Citizens" and No. 2/2021 "National

Security Education in School Curriculum – Implementation Mode and Learning and Teaching Resources" on February 4, 2021 to provide guidelines on school administration and education in relation to safeguarding national security, as well as details about the mode of implementation and learning and teaching resources for national security education in the school curriculum, with a view to facilitating schools to put in place measures to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment in schools and promote national security education.

It is the responsibility of schools to implement national security education through the school curriculum. National security education is inseparable from national education. The EDB has been adopting a "multi-pronged and co-ordinated" approach and supporting schools (via individual subjects, cross-curricular moral and civic education topics and life-wide learning activities, etc.) in promoting national education within and beyond the school curriculum through updating the curriculum, developing learning and teaching resources, providing training for teachers, as well as organising student activities, Mainland exchanges and the Sister School Scheme. The purposes are to enable students to gain an all-round understanding of our country, develop a sense of belonging towards the country, and have a correct understanding of the constitutional order established by the Constitution and the Basic Law as well as important concepts such as the roles and responsibilities as nationals. This will help nurture students into good citizens who have a sense of national identity, show respect for the rule of law and abide by the law, hence safeguarding national security.

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan is as follows:

(1) and (3) The number of lesson hours is not the main point in implementing national security education in schools. Instead, schools should adopt a whole-school approach in promoting national security education within and beyond the classroom. At the primary and secondary school level, the fundamentals of national security education are to develop in students a sense of belonging to the country, an affection for the Chinese people, a sense of national identity, as well as an awareness of and a sense of responsibility for safeguarding national security. It should enable students to become good citizens who have a sense of national identity, show respect for the rule of law and abide by the law. National security education is not confined to learning the provisions of the NSL. It should cover its legislative background and rationale, and enable students to understand different aspects of national security such as ecological security, economic security and cybersecurity. Providing opportunities for students to understand the history and culture of the country, the Constitution and the Basic Law (including national security) in a progressive manner from a young age are the responsibilities of school education. These learning elements are relevant to students of all ages, but their depth and breadth could be adjusted to align with the cognitive development of students at different stages.

The EDB has added "Supplement: National Security" to the updated standalone module on "Constitution and the Basic Law" at the junior secondary level to enable junior secondary students to understand the concept of national security through learning more about the close relationship between the Central Authorities and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Apart from this Supplement, related topics, teaching foci and learning elements on national security are already covered in the existing primary and secondary school curricula. By making reference to the Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong (the Framework) and the national security education curriculum frameworks for various subjects, schools can enhance co-ordination and planning at a whole-school curriculum level so that concepts related to national security education can be connected naturally and integrated organically through subject teaching and various activities.

For lower primary students (usually aged 6 to 9), schools may outline topics related to national education, such as the national flag, national anthem, law enforcement agencies, law-abiding concepts and names of crimes under the NSL, by making reference to the Framework provided by the EDB, so as to strengthen students' knowledge of the rule of law and develop their sense of national identity in a progressive manner. We would like to stress that our teachers are professionals who should know how to simplify or translate relatively complex concepts by means of simple and interesting pedagogies appropriate to the age groups of the students. Teachers may deliver national security education through fun and interesting activities, daily life examples relevant to primary students, and most importantly, their role modelling. To cater for the learning needs of younger students, the EDB has recently produced an audio picture book entitled "[Let's Learn about National Security](http://emm.edcity.hk/media/1_tjh0ht5c)" (emm.edcity.hk/media/1_tjh0ht5c) for primary students to learn about the basic concepts of national security through an animated story, without delving into details of the NSL. More interesting resources for young students will be produced by the EDB in the future to support the implementation of national security education by schools.

The EDB has been providing schools with various grants, including the Operating Expenses Block Grant or the Expanded Operating Expenses Block Grant, as well as the Life-wide Learning Grant at \$900 million per year for flexible use by public sector and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools to organise diversified learning activities on national education and national security education since the 2019/20 school year. If necessary, schools may apply to the Quality Education Fund for additional resources. Furthermore, schools and parent-teacher associations can also apply for the Home-School Co-operation Grant to organise activities for promoting home-school cooperation and parent education.

The EDB will understand the implementation of national security education inside and outside classroom in schools and the learning effectiveness of students via different channels such as inspections and school visits, during which we will identify good practices for recommendations and sharing, and offer advice to schools as appropriate in order to enhance the related work and the effectiveness in planning and delivering national security education by schools.

(4) and (5) Starting from the 2020/21 school year, the EDB has set out more specific training requirements for newly-joined teachers, serving teachers and teachers aspiring for promotion. The core training, which includes contents about Constitution, Basic Law and national security education, aims at enhancing teachers' understanding of "One Country, Two Systems", national security and national development. Apart from these, the core training for newly-joined teachers and teachers aspiring for promotion also includes Mainland study tours, which provide teachers with first-hand experience to learn about the development of education on the Mainland and the achievements of the country, and enable them to inspire students to think of the opportunities for Hong Kong brought about by the national development and the contributions Hong Kong can make. Relevant training programmes have been rolled out in phases since November 2020. Meanwhile, the EDB is actively liaising and working with expert organisations to enhance teachers' training on Constitution, Basic Law and national security education through diversified modes such as talks and seminars. In this regard, we have arranged a series of training courses for teachers under the theme of "Respecting the Law, Reinforcing the Rule of Law" in November 2020 and March 2021. On the other hand, the EDB is strengthening its liaison with teacher education institutions for incorporating contents of Constitution, Basic Law and national security education in the pre-service teacher training programmes.

In alignment with the curriculum, the EDB has also provided relevant professional development programmes for teachers, including knowledge enrichment, curriculum planning, learning and teaching strategies, etc. For example, activities such as National Security Education Knowledge Enrichment Seminar Series, online courses and school leaders' workshops have been organised for primary and secondary school teachers. Teachers' networks and learning circles are also established for sharing experience. If possible, we will consider inviting Mainland experts and academics to explain the Constitution or national security to our teachers.

In the future, the EDB will continue to strengthen support measures for schools and maintain communication and collaboration with various stakeholders and experts in a joint effort to promote national security education.

LCQ3: Ancillary transport and accommodation facilities of Kai Tak Cruise Terminal

Following is a question by the Hon Mrs Regina Ip and a reply by the

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

Due to the rampant epidemic, it has been months since cruise vessels last berthed at the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal (KTCT). The KTCT operator has pointed out that in the past, most of the cruise passengers experienced great inconvenience as they had to queue up for a long time, while carrying bulky luggage, for taxis to travel to and from KTCT and hotels, the airport or their homes. On the other hand, in respect of six sites near KTCT originally reserved for hotel use, the Government has rezoned four of them for building residential flats, and is studying the rezoning of the remaining two sites for residential use as well. Some members of the tourism industry consider that the Government should expeditiously improve the ancillary transport and accommodation facilities of KTCT, so as to offer a better travel experience for the cruise passengers who will return after the epidemic has come to an end. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has plans in the coming three years to provide car parks on the idle sites near KTCT, so that local residents going on a cruise trip may choose to travel to and from KTCT by private cars, thereby shortening the queue for taxis; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has plans in the coming three years to introduce water taxi service plying between KTCT and the Kwun Tong Public Pier for use by cruise passengers, thereby shortening the queue for taxis and alleviating the traffic load on roads; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will keep the aforesaid two sites for hotel use, so as to address the accommodation needs of cruise passengers in future; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Thank you for the Hon Mrs Regina Ip's question. Having consulted the Development Bureau (DEVB) and the Transport and Housing Bureau, I provide a consolidated reply as follows:

Having regard to the overall development at Kai Tak, the Transport Department (TD) has all along been enhancing public transport services thereat so as to meet the development needs and the transport demand of cruise passengers. At present, there are daily franchised bus and green minibus routes serving the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal (KTCT), Kwun Tong and Kowloon City, as well as ferry service connecting North Point, Kwun Tong and Kai Tak Runway Park during weekends and public holidays.

When there are ship calls at KTCT, the terminal operator will also arrange shuttle bus services for cruise passengers and provide ship call

information to the taxi trade in order to cater for the extra transport demand during the ship call. According to TD's survey conducted in early 2020 before the epidemic, the waiting time for taxis at KTCT was about five minutes in general.

In addition, the Civil Engineering and Development Department has already completed the road improvement works connecting KTCT and Kowloon Bay. It expects that construction works for the Road D3 (Metro Park Section) located at the north of the former runway would be substantially completed by 2022, providing a direct vehicular linkage between KTCT and MTR Kai Tak Station.

On the basis of the existing road and railway infrastructure as well as public transport services at Kai Tak, the Government also proposes to implement a "multi-modal" Environmentally Friendly Linkage System that consists of electric bus/minibus services, travellers network, pedestrian and cycling paths, water taxis, etc. so as to connect the railway stations, business districts and public transport interchanges at Kai Tak, Kwun Tong, Ngau Tau Kok and Kowloon Bay. This would enhance the connectivity in the area and at the same time, facilitate cruise passengers.

In response to the three questions raised by the Hon Mrs Regina Ip, my specific reply is as follows:

(1) Immigration services at KTCT are currently suspended due to the epidemic. When we resume receiving cruise ships, the public transport services (including taxis and shuttle buses) that I mentioned just now should be sufficient to meet cruise passengers' demand. The Government also encourages cruise passengers to use public transport to travel to and from KTCT. The Government has not planned to provide a substantial number of parking spaces in the vicinity of KTCT for use by cruise passengers. In fact, KTCT already provides about 120 public parking spaces for private cars, and the adjacent Kai Tak Tourism Node also reserves another some 100 public parking spaces for private cars.

(2) In respect of waterborne transport, as mentioned earlier on, there is ferry service plying between Kwun Tong and Kai Tak during weekends and public holidays, and TD would discuss with the operator for service enhancement if necessary. TD is also working with the relevant operator on the "water taxi" service connecting Kai Tak, Hung Hom, Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade, West Kowloon Cultural District and Central, and part of the trial service is expected to be launched in the second half of 2021.

(3) Taking into account the latest economic situation and market response, DEVB is examining the feasibility of rezoning five commercial sites (including hotel use) in Kowloon East for residential use, three of which are located next to KTCT. For the Kai Tak Tourism Node adjacent to KTCT, the successful tenderer will be required to provide a minimum of 15 per cent of the total gross floor area for hotel use.

In general, cruise passengers' demand for hotel accommodation near KTCT

is not high given that non-local cruise passengers normally have their accommodation arranged on-board and they would travel to different places in Hong Kong upon arrival at KTCT for sightseeing at tourist attractions, shopping or other accommodation experience instead of just staying around KTCT. In any event, we will closely monitor the hotel demand of cruise passengers, and continue to review the overall hotel supply in Hong Kong in consultation with relevant bureaux and departments. Thank you.

LCQ13: Provision of assistance for industries affected by the epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Starry Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

To cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic, the Government has invoked, on a number of occasions since March last year, the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirement and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) to direct various types of scheduled premises to suspend operation on specified dates, with the period of suspension ranging from 44 to 200-odd days in total. Some operators of such premises have indicated that as they still need to meet expenses such as rent despite suffering substantial reduction of income, they are now at the end of their tether and on the brink of closing down. They have also pointed out that the Government did not make decisions on whether the scheduled premises were required to suspend operation on the basis of objective criteria. For instance, cinemas, where only passive activities are involved and customers can wear a face mask at all times, have been required to suspend operation for a greater number of days than swimming pools, where active activities are involved and customers can hardly wear a face mask. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will revise its current practice and make decisions as to whether the various types of scheduled premises are required to suspend operation on the basis of the risk of epidemic spreading; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will discuss separately with the operators of various types of scheduled premises to tailor-make appropriate epidemic prevention arrangements (e.g. arranging for staff to undergo COVID-19 testing, cleaning up and disinfecting venues, registering customer information) on the basis of the characteristics of the activities conducted on the scheduled premises, so that such premises will not be required to suspend operation for epidemic

prevention reasons; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) as the Singapore Government has enacted legislation on temporary measures to stipulate that a tenant of a non-residential property who is unable to pay rent mainly due to the COVID-19 epidemic may suspend rent payment upon serving a notification on its landlord, and the landlord may not, on account of this, commence legal proceedings or terminate the lease, whether the Government will study (i) introducing a similar scheme of "rent holidays" for the scheduled premises, or (ii) encouraging, through provision of financial incentives, the landlords to grant rent cuts, so as to relieve the financial pressure on the operators concerned; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) given that the scheduled premises have suffered substantial income loss due to suspension of operation or reduction of business hours pursuant to the relevant directions, whether the Government will provide further financial support for the operators concerned so as to relieve their financial pressure; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau and Human Resources Planning and Poverty Co-ordination Unit of the Chief Secretary for Administration's Private Office, my consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Starry Lee is as follows:

(1) and (2) Social distancing measures can effectively prevent the spread of the virus in the community and are an integral part of infection control measures. The implementation of stringent and decisive social distancing measures was the key to the Government's success in containing the third wave of the epidemic. In particular, the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) regulates the mode of operation of catering business and 15 types of scheduled premises. The Government has all along been adjusting our social distancing measures in a decisive and prompt manner, after balancing factors such as the protection of public health, impact on the economy and social acceptance having regard to the development of the epidemic situation. At the peaks of the previous waves of the epidemic, in order to control the epidemic situation decisively, the Government's major considerations when tightening social distancing measures (including requiring scheduled premises to close) were the latest overall situation of the epidemic and risk assessments, with a view to reducing social contacts and cutting the transmission chain at an early stage as soon as possible.

The Government understands that some premises under Cap. 599F have already suspended operation for a period of time and are facing considerable difficulties and the unemployment situation of many sectors is deteriorating. At the same time, having been engaged in the efforts to fight the epidemic

for months, public adherence to social distancing measures has notably declined. Despite the severe epidemic situation earlier, there were still a large number of people out and about, and many continued to participate in cross-family gatherings. In light of the above, and having considered factors including economic situation and social acceptance, the Government has already announced that we would adopt a more precise approach in adjusting the social distancing measures, with a view to allowing resumption of normal life as soon as possible while minimising the impact on economic activities and the sectors involved.

The fourth wave of the epidemic has been gradually subsiding earlier. Having regard to the developments of the epidemic situation and risk assessments at the time, the Government had started to gradually relax social distancing measures with conditions since February 18 by reopening seven types of scheduled premises (viz. amusement game centre, fitness centre, place of amusement, place of public entertainment, beauty parlour, massage establishment and sports premises), as well as extending the period during which catering businesses may provide dine-in services to end at 10pm and increasing the number of persons per table to up to four. Compared with the relaxation of social distancing measures when the third wave of the epidemic came under control, the Government has already relaxed the relevant measures to a greater extent this time in order to resume social and economic activities as soon as possible while the epidemic situation permits.

The above relaxation of social distancing measures was based on the ongoing close communications that the Government had with the catering businesses and sectors relevant to the scheduled premises, where we understood that they were willing to proactively comply with the Government's anti-epidemic measures. In order to reduce the risks of virus transmission at the relevant premises after the relaxation of the social distancing measures, the responsible persons of the premises must adopt two new infection control measures as follows –

Measure (a): ensure that users scan the "LeaveHomeSafe" venue QR code using the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application on their mobile phones or register their names, contact numbers and the dates and times of their visits before they are allowed to enter the premises, with records to be kept for 31 days; and

Measure (b): arrange for all staff involved in the operation of the premises to undergo a polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid test for COVID-19 once every 14 days and ensure that the staff keep records of every SMS notification containing the result of the test for 31 days.

Taking into account the risks of catering business and scheduled premises, the Government has expanded the priority groups under the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme to cover staff of these premises since March 8. We appeal to the operators and staff of these premises to get vaccinated as soon as possible in order to protect themselves and others. If the overall uptake rate of the COVID-19 vaccine is satisfactory, together with the general public working together to strictly observe other anti-epidemic measures

(such as wearing of masks, using the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application, etc.), the restrictions on restaurants and other commercial premises can be considered to be further relaxed, and the currently closed premises can be considered to resume business. The greater the number of people getting vaccinated, the better the protection effect for society as a whole and for high-risk persons. There will also be greater room for resuming normal social and economic activities.

In addition, the Government has also required individual premises to adopt different infection control measures having regard to their respective operating characteristics. For instance, in view of the recent cluster in eateries, in order to step up infection control measures of eateries, the Government has required, starting from March 4, all catering business to arrange, if practicable, dedicated staff for clearing used utensils and cleaning and disinfecting used tables and partitions or suitably adopt hand hygiene measures. In view of the recent large-scale cluster outbreak in a fitness centre, we have tightened the infection control measures in fitness centres with immediate effect from March 12, reinstating the mask-on requirement, in order to contain the epidemic.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the latest development of the epidemic situation as well as the progress of the vaccination programme and its effect on disease prevention and control, review from time to time and suitably adjust the social distancing measures. We will, having regard to the development of the epidemic situation and subject to the epidemic situation coming under control and continuing to subside, continue to relax social distancing measures in a gradual and orderly manner by phases in a more precise approach. The Government will also continue to maintain close communication with the relevant trades, listen to their views and suggestions on the implementation of anti-epidemic measures at the relevant premises, as well as provide more details on the implementation of the measures.

(3) To support enterprises, the Government continues to grant the 75 per cent rental or fee concession currently applicable to eligible tenants of government properties and eligible short-term tenancies and waivers under the Lands Department for six months starting from April 2021. During the period, tenants who have to close their properties at the request of the Government will continue to receive full rental waiver for the duration of the closure. The Government appeals to public bodies to follow suit and provide rental concession to their tenants.

(4) Having regard to the fact that scheduled premises and catering outlets were ordered to close or reduce their operating hours, the Government introduced different measures under the second-, third- and fourth-round Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) to provide financial relief to these premises and catering outlets, with a total financial commitment of over \$15 billion.

In the past year, the Government increased government expenditure substantially to combat the epidemic and roll out relief measures, with measures launched under the AEF and last year's Budget exceeding \$300 billion

in total. The Government forecast a budget deficit of some \$250 billion for 2020-2021. The Government will closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and continue with the anti-epidemic efforts to suppress the epidemic so that our economic activities and daily lives could resume normal as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the AEF Steering Committee will continue to optimise the remaining balance of the AEF based on the proposals put forth by the relevant bureaux/departments, having regard to the development of the pandemic, views from various industry stakeholders and their actual business situation.

On the other hand, to assist small and medium enterprises (SMEs) hard hit by the COVID-19 epidemic in coping with cash flow problems, the Government launched on April 20, 2020 the Special 100% Guarantee Product under the SME Financing Guarantee Scheme to provide low-interest concessionary loans. As at end February 2021, \$45.33 billion of loans were approved, benefitting over 21 000 enterprises, involving over 268 000 employees. As the epidemic has been lingering on for over one year, to continue to relieve the cash flow pressure of SMEs, the Financial Secretary announced in the 2021-22 Budget that the Government would extend the application period of the Special 100% Guarantee Product to December 31, 2021; further increase the maximum loan amount per enterprise from the total amount of employee wages and rents for 12 months to that for 18 months, with the ceiling increasing from \$5 million to \$6 million; extend the maximum repayment period from five years to eight years; and extend the maximum duration of principal moratorium from 12 months to 18 months.

[Man sentenced for breaching compulsory quarantine order](#)

A 35-year-old man was sentenced to immediate imprisonment for six days by the Tuen Mun Magistrates' Courts today (March 17) for violating the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C) (the Regulation).

The man was earlier issued a compulsory quarantine order stating that he must conduct quarantine at home for 14 days. Before the expiry of the quarantine order, he left the place of quarantine on June 3, 2020, without reasonable excuse nor permission given by an authorised officer. He was charged with contravening sections 8(1) and 8(5) of the Regulation and was sentenced by the Tuen Mun Magistrates' Courts today to immediate imprisonment for six days.

Pursuant to the Regulation, all persons who have stayed in the Mainland, Macao or Taiwan in the 14 days preceding arrival in Hong Kong, regardless of their nationality or travel documents, will be subject to compulsory

quarantine for 14 days. Moreover, pursuant to the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap. 599E), starting from December 25, 2020, all persons arriving in Hong Kong (either via the airport or land boundary control points) who have stayed in places outside China on the day of arrival in Hong Kong or during the 21 days before that day have to undergo compulsory quarantine for 21 days in designated quarantine hotels. Breaching a quarantine order is a criminal offence and offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months.

A spokesman for the Department of Health said the sentence sends a clear message to the community that breaching a compulsory quarantine order is a criminal offence that the Government will not tolerate, and solemnly reminded the public to comply with the Regulation. As of today, a total of 116 persons have been convicted by the courts for breaching compulsory quarantine orders and have received sentences including immediate imprisonment for up to 14 weeks or a fine of up to \$15,000. The spokesman reiterated that resolute actions will be taken against anyone who has breached the relevant regulations.

[LCQ12: Unemployment problem](#)

Following is a question by the Hon Yiu Si-wing and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-king, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

The Government launched the Employment Support Scheme (ESS) under the Anti-epidemic Fund last year to provide wage subsidies to eligible employers in two tranches for paying the wages of their employees from June to August and from September to November last year. As the Government has not provided wage subsidies any longer since December last year, and Hong Kong's economy has not shown any improvement, quite a number of employers have one after another laid off their employees to cut expenses. On the other hand, the latest seasonally adjusted unemployment rate is seven per cent, hitting a record high in 17 years, with the number of unemployed persons reaching as high as 250 000. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the up-to-date expenditure and the current balance of the ESS;
- (2) whether it has reviewed if the ESS is cost effective in retaining jobs in the long run; if it has reviewed and the outcome is in the affirmative, whether it will launch the ESS again; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) of the extent to which the unemployment problem has worsened not until which will the Government launch new short-term measures to assist the unemployed?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with relevant bureaux and departments, my reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) The first and second tranche of the Employment Support Scheme (ESS) respectively covers June to August 2020 and September to November 2020. There are respectively 151 800 and 152 100 employers who have successfully applied for wage subsidies in the two tranches, covering about 1.95 million employees. In respect of expenses relating to wage subsidies, a total of about \$45.2 billion and \$45 billion have been respectively disbursed under the two tranches. Among the total approved allocation for the ESS, the amount reserved for subsidy disbursement has been fully disbursed. Overall speaking, the vetting and subsidy disbursement work under the ESS have been largely completed. The Secretariat is currently working on follow-ups of the ESS, which include investigating reported cases and clawing back wage subsidies from employers who have not fully complied with the terms and conditions of the Scheme.

(2) Under the two tranches of the ESS, there is respectively about 80 per cent of employers who could maintain their total number of paid employees not less than the "committed headcount of paid employees" (meaning the total number of paid or unpaid staff in March 2020). As regards the remaining 20 per cent of employers, about three quarters of them have slightly reduced one to two employees.

Separately, economic recession has been accelerated in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic since the beginning of last year. The unemployment rate in the second quarter of last year has already exceeded six per cent. Nonetheless, since the announcement and implementation of the ESS in April and May respectively, the labour market has shown signs of stabilisation towards the end of second quarter of 2020, and the unemployment rate largely remained stable with no substantial increase during the subsidy period.

As reflected in the above figures, the Government considers that the ESS has largely achieved its policy objective which is to assist employers to retain employees who will otherwise be made redundant, which preserves employment for employees and in turn prevents the further worsening in the labour market.

In the long run, having considered factors including the capability of the public finance, a more prudent approach vis-à-vis implementing new round of the ESS is to put in place supportive measures in a targeted manner, with a view to directly offering assistance to people in need and assisting businesses to restart. The Government will continue to closely monitor the

impact of the epidemic on various industries and review as appropriate, so that we could preserve our capacity until the epidemic stabilises.

(3) In view of the continuous fluctuations of the epidemic which has seriously affected Hong Kong's economy and labour market, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has been keeping in view changes of the actual circumstances and striving to exploring ways to strengthen assistance for the unemployed and their families. Over the past year, in light of the tremendous challenges brought about by the epidemic to Hong Kong's employment situation and overall economy, the Government has implemented a host of measures to create and stabilise job opportunities, and also provided suitable relief to sectors and individuals hard-hit by the epidemic or affected by the anti-epidemic and social distancing measures. Coupled with the Government's injection into the Anti-Epidemic Fund and the Budget last year, the Government has increased government expenditure substantially to combat the epidemic and roll out relief measures totalling over \$300 billion. It is anticipated that the consolidated deficit for the financial year of 2020-21 will surge to about \$250 billion. The Government will, having regard to the development of the epidemic and the situation of different sectors, review the effectiveness of the relief measures and introduce enhancements if needed.

In view of the gloomy job market under the epidemic and the tremendous challenges to Hong Kong's employment situation and overall economy, the Government has implemented various measures to promote jobs creation, employment and re-employment, and also support to individuals and families with financial difficulties. The relevant measures include the provision of 2 000 employment places under the Greater Bay Area Youth Employment Scheme; the third tranche of the Love Upgrading Special Scheme launched by the Employees Retraining Board in January this year providing a doubled quota for 20 000 trainees followed by the fourth tranche of the Scheme to be launched in July this year; uplift of the ceiling of on-the-job training allowance payable to employers under the Labour Department's Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged, the Youth Employment and Training Programme and the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme together with payment of a retention allowance on a pilot basis to eligible employees engaged under these employment programmes; and also two rounds of the "One-off Living Subsidy for Low-income Households Not Living in Public Housing and Not Receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA)" Programme and one round of the "One-off Allowance for New Arrivals from Low-income Families" Programme launched by the Community Care Fund.

In addition, the Government has launched the time-limited "Special Scheme of Assistance to the Unemployed" under CSSA Scheme to temporarily relax the asset limits for able-bodied persons by 100 per cent for 12 months from June 2020 to May 2021. The Government will also implement another time-limited new arrangement under the special scheme during the six months of April to September 2021. Specifically, the cash value of insurance policies of able-bodied CSSA applicants will not be counted as assets during the grace period of one year. The Financial Secretary will also allocate \$6.6 billion to create another 30 000 time-limited jobs.

The Government will continue to listen to views of members of the public and provide more assistance for the unemployed and their families in the light of the development and needs.