

LCQ10: Fertility rate of Hong Kong

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Che-cheung and a written reply by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (September 8):

Question:

It is learnt that the fertility rate of Hong Kong has been on the low side and dropping continuously in recent years and it even dropped to a record low of 0.87 last year. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether, in the past three years, it conducted assessments on the reasons for the fertility rate of Hong Kong being persistently on the low side in recent years, and the impacts of the low fertility rate on the various aspects of Hong Kong; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (2) whether it has explored new measures to boost the fertility rate; and
- (3) whether it has set a warning line for the fertility rate, so that the Government will take more aggressive measures to encourage childbearing in the event that the fertility rate has fallen below the warning line; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The consolidated reply from the Government to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Leung Che-cheung is as follows:

According to information from the Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong's total fertility rate has been lower than the replacement level of 2.1 (i.e. the fertility rate to sustain the natural population unchanged) for more than three decades and has remained between 0.9 and 1.3 since mid-1990s. Our total fertility rates in the past three years were 0.87 (2020), 1.05 (2019) and 1.07 (2018) respectively. As in other Asian developed economies such as Singapore and South Korea, a decreasing marriage rate, as well as delayed marriage and childbearing are the main contributing factors of our low fertility rate. The total fertility rate further decreased in 2020 under the influence of the pandemic, and similar pattern was also observed in other Asian regions or countries.

A family's decision to bear a child is dependent on various factors, including personal choice, lifestyle preference, economic and social circumstances, and childbearing is a major family decision, excessive government intervention may not be appropriate. The Government has not set a warning line for the fertility rate.

Declining birth rate and longer life expectancy have led to rapid ageing of our population. The Government has been paying close attention to the issue and has been studying and putting in place different measures to tackle the situation. Experiences from other places show that financial incentive alone may not be able to increase the desire for childbearing effectively. Government policies should aim at fostering a supportive environment for childbearing and promoting family-friendly measures to provide better support for couples who wish to have children. In this connection, the Government has formulated a number of family-friendly measures in recent years, including:

1. Supporting parents to raise children: The child allowance under salaries tax has been increased from \$70,000 for the year of assessment 2014/15 to \$120,000 for the year of assessment 2018/19, representing an increase of over 70 per cent; the Kindergarten Education Scheme was launched in the 2017/18 school year; and the \$2,500 student grant has been regularised from the 2020/21 school year onwards.

2. Enhancement of child care services: The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has planned to increase around 900 aided standalone child care centre (CCC) places through new development projects in three to four years from 2020-21. At the same time, the SWD also planned to purchase suitable premises for the use of CCCs so as to increase around 1 000 places. In addition, the SWD has increased the subsidy level of CCC service and enhanced the manning ratio of qualified Care Centre Workers while implementing a host of measures for enhancement of the After School Care Programme, including adding 2 500 full fee-waiving subsidy places, relaxing application eligibility and increasing the subsidy level.

3. Supporting parents to take care of newborn babies: We have implemented the five-day statutory paternity leave since January 18, 2019, and statutory maternity leave has been extended to 14 weeks since December 11, 2020, to allow eligible employees more time to spend with and take care of their newborn babies. Moreover, to support and protect breastfeeding in Hong Kong, the Government has amended the Sex Discrimination Ordinance to prohibit discrimination and harassment towards breastfeeding women. The "Breastfeeding GPS" mobile application, which contains the latest information of over 430 baby care rooms to help parents locate breastfeeding facilities all over Hong Kong has been launched in September last year.

In addition, the Labour Department is committed to promoting family-friendly employment practices to the community through a wide range of publicity channels and various promotional activities. Employers are encouraged to adopt "employee-oriented" good people management measures with a view to helping employees balance their work and family responsibilities. Employers are encouraged to provide their employees with more favourable employment benefits than the statutory requirements and provide them with flexible and varied work arrangements and support (e.g. flexible working hours, five-day work, work from home, parental leave and child care service) to meet individual employees' special needs at their different stages of life.

The above family-friendly measures could foster a supportive environment for childbearing, providing better support for couples who wish to have children.