

LCQ11: Assisting small and medium-sized law firms in applying technologies

Following is a question by the Hon Maggie Chan and a written reply by the Secretary for Innovation, Technology and Industry, Professor Sun Dong, in the Legislative Council today (November 15):

Question:

There are views pointing out that although the Technology Voucher Programme (the Programme) is applicable to the legal sector, its effect on small and medium-sized law firms is limited because their applications for using technology vouchers to purchase hardware equipment are subject to certain conditions, and they cannot meet the application requirements of technology vouchers due to the greater costs of hardware equipment (which are often more than 50 per cent of project costs). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will set up a dedicated scheme under the Programme to support small and medium-sized law firms in using the Judiciary's integrated Court Case Management System and other electronic technologies, with specific measures including relaxing the conditions for purchasing hardware equipment, expanding the scope of hardware equipment covered by technology vouchers (to, for example, cover small hardware equipment used by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) including small and medium-sized law firms), and allowing applicants to purchase hardware equipment directly without the need to purchase supporting software; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(2) whether it will provide SMEs including small and medium-sized law firms with cybersecurity defence equipment dedicated to their use under the Programme to assist them in protecting data; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

The Technology Voucher Programme (TVP) under the Innovation and Technology Fund was launched in 2016 to subsidise local enterprises/organisations in using technological services and solutions to improve productivity, or upgrade or transform their business processes with a view to enhancing their long-term competitiveness. At present, TVP provides funding support for up to three-quarters of the cost of each project, with a cumulative funding ceiling of \$600,000 for each enterprise/organisation. As at end-September 2023, 28 189 applications were approved under TVP, involving total funding commitment of around \$4.93 billion. Having coordinated information from the relevant parties, our consolidated reply to various

parts of the question is as follows:

TVP welcomes applications from enterprises/organisations from all industries. Since the launch of TVP, a total of 1 064 applications were received from enterprises of the professional services sector (including legal and accounting services), out of which 921 were approved, involving total funding commitment of up to \$145 million. There was a law firm which made use of TVP to install a document management system to digitise documents and file client emails automatically, thereby improving the efficiency of document searching and filing. There was also a law firm which set up an appointment scheduling system that enabled clients to check the availability of appointment time and make appointments online, reducing workload of staff and avoiding manual error in making more than one appointment for the same slot in the past.

TVP does not have pre-defined eligible types of technological services. Cybersecurity solution is among the list of typical technological services and/or solutions for reference by applicants in the TVP Guidance Notes for Applications. There are applicants who used TVP to customise software and upgrade cybersecurity system of the enterprise to protect customer privacy. Eligible applications will be considered by the TVP Committee.

TVP funding can be used to cover technology consultancy services, purchase, rental or subscription of equipment/hardware, software and technological services or solutions that are part of the project. We hope to encourage enterprises/organisations to review their businesses and adopt suitable technology to tackle business-related challenges, thereby improving productivity or upgrade or transform their business processes, instead of solely procuring off-the-shelf technological products or services. However, we are aware that technological services and solutions will inevitably involve some ready-made elements that are at the same time an essential part of the project. Balancing the considerations above, off-the-shelf/readily available items are generally allowed to constitute up to 50 per cent of the total project cost.

All along, the Innovation and Technology Commission values the industry's opinion on TVP, and conducts timely reviews of the funding arrangements and introduces enhancement measures to encourage and facilitate utilisation of TVP by the industry. TVP, through providing funding support, has been effectively facilitating the adoption of technological services and solutions by various industries to improve productivity, or upgrade or transform business processes and is well-received. We have no plan to introduce a dedicated funding programme for individual sector.

Meanwhile, to facilitate all court users (including the legal practitioners) to handle court documents electronically, it is the intention of the Judiciary that no special digital support facility is required for the use of the integrated Court Case Management System (iCMS). iCMS can be accessed using personal computers or mobile devices with internet connection, commonly used operating systems and browsers. Relevant technical requirements are available at www.judiciary.hk/doc/en/e_courts/AI_TechReq_iCMS_e.pdf.