

LCQ15: Arrangements for water charges

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Che-cheung and a written reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

The Water Supplies Department (WSD) suspended its routine work of taking readings of water meters on several occasions last year on grounds of epidemic prevention, and upon resumption of meter-reading work, it calculated the water consumption for the combined billing periods concerned on the basis of the preceding and the latest actual meter readings of the accounts concerned for issuing water bills. Since the duration of a billing period was changed from four months to a maximum of 12 months, some members of the public had to pay a considerable amount of water charges in one go. Some members of the public have indicated that such calculation method has posed immense financial pressure on them. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the WSD has, before issuing water bills demanding the payment of a considerable amount of water charges, publicised to members of the public the aforesaid calculation method of water charges through various channels (including the Government's television announcements in the public interest and notifications by post); if not, of the reasons for that;

(2) whether the WSD will exercise discretion to waive the surcharges on overdue water charges, and allow members of the public to opt for settling water charges by instalments; if not, of the reasons for that;

(3) of the latest progress of the implementation of the Automatic Meter Reading System by the WSD, and the number of smart water meters which the WSD plans to install within the coming three years; whether it has assessed if the problems arising from suspending meter-reading work may be avoided with the adoption of such system; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the WSD's plans to expedite the installation of smart water meters on clients' premises; and

(4) as some members of the public have pointed out that the aforesaid calculation method of water charges has caused inconvenience to them and posed financial pressure on them, whether the WSD will propose to the Financial Secretary that the following initiative be put forward in the Budget soon to be announced: waiving the water charges payable by members of the public for at least one period; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the Hon Leung Che-cheung's question is as follows:

(1) The Water Supplies Department (WSD) announced on September 7, 2020 by a press release that the WSD would cancel water bills based on estimated meter readings, and would calculate the water consumption and water charges payable for the combined billing periods according to the meter readings taken before the suspension of routine meter reading and the latest actual meter readings taken for issuing water bills, with the amount payable be deducted by the amount of water charges paid for the cancelled bills. Some water bills issued may cover water charges of two to three billing periods and the amount payable may be more than the usual water bills covering only one billing period. As the water consumption allowed in different tiers will be adjusted on a pro-rata basis according to the number of days in the period, consumers will not be overcharged due to combined billing period. The WSD also mentioned the suspension of routine meter reading and the billing arrangement in its press release on public services arrangements on December 1, 2020.

In this connection, the WSD has updated its website as well as its Facebook page. From early December 2020, the WSD had also inserted leaflets in water bills issued with combined billing period to remind the consumers the billing arrangement. Moreover, the WSD has also sent emails to all members of District Councils, Legislative Council members with geographical constituency as well as the Hong Kong Association of Property Management Companies explaining the arrangement. Posters are also posted within areas of the residential estates under the Hong Kong Housing Authority and the Hong Kong Housing Society.

(2) The epidemic situation may have changed the water consumption habit of the consumers, such as more cooking at home, stronger sense of personal and household hygiene, causing an increase in water consumption. However, individual cases with substantial increase in water consumption may be caused by other factors such as leakage. The WSD would investigate and follow up. The WSD would also advise the consumers concerned that the due date of the relevant water bills would be deferred and no surcharge will be imposed accordingly. If consumers have genuine financial difficulty, they may apply for extension of payment due date or payment by instalments. The WSD would process the applications with discretion on a case-by-case basis.

(3) The WSD is introducing an automatic meter reading system (AMR) in suitable new development projects. AMR not only improves the accuracy of meter reading, but also provides customers with timely water consumption data and other useful information, thereby enhancing their awareness of water conservation and prevention of water leakage. In the long run, the comprehensive introduction of AMR can save the manual meter reading work and avoid problems arising from the suspension of meter reading work. Therefore, the relevant land documents for all suitable new private development projects, as well as all suitable new public and government development projects, have stipulated the requirement for implementing AMR. So far, the WSD has received about 50 related applications involving 110 new buildings and about 30 000 smart water meters. It is expected that the number of smart water meters installed will gradually increase to more than 18 000 in the next three years, including about 4 000 meters in public housing development projects and about 14 000 meters in private development projects.

Regarding the installation of AMR in existing buildings, as more than three million customer accounts are involved, coupled with the need of cable installation for connecting smart water meters and AMR outstation in the buildings, it is envisaged that the implementation will have greater impact on the public and incur higher costs. Therefore, at this stage, the WSD is closely monitoring the latest development in the application of wireless communication technology for smart water meters and conducting pilot tests at suitable locations. When the relevant technology becomes mature in the future, we will review the situation and explore the technical feasibility of implementing wireless AMR in existing buildings so as to speed up the installation of smart water meters.

(4) The Budget is now under public consultation, and the Government will deliberate valuable views from all sectors of the society.