

LCQ16: Supporting persons with hearing impairment

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Tik Chi-yuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (June 21):

Question:

According to the figures of the Census and Statistics Department, there were 246 200 persons with hearing difficulty across the territory in 2020. Regarding the support for persons with hearing impairment, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of (i) the number of deaf/hard-of-hearing persons in Hong Kong, (ii) the respective numbers of them using the services of various government departments, (iii) the number of times they required the service of sign language interpreters (SLIs) when using the services of various government departments and (iv) the average time of each use of SLI service, in each of the past five years;
- (2) of the number of deaf persons using the 992 Emergency SMS service of the Hong Kong Police Force, the average time taken from case-reporting to police arrival at the scene, as well as the average waiting time for SLI service by such persons when reporting cases at police stations respectively in each of the past five years;
- (3) given that the Police indicated in a media interview in 2017 that it would study the feasibility of processing photos and videos by the 992 Emergency SMS service, of the current progress of the relevant work;
- (4) whether it knows the number of persons on the list of SLIs maintained by the Judiciary and the number of court proceedings in which sign language interpretation service was required by deaf/hard-of-hearing persons, in each of the past five years; whether such information will be made open for public access; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (5) as there are views that the integrated education currently implemented by the Education Bureau lacks support for deaf/hard-of-hearing persons in the learning of sign language, whether the Government will enhance sign language education for deaf/hard-of-hearing persons and others; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (6) as it is learnt that currently, there is no official standard sign language system in Hong Kong, whether the Government will implement an official sign language system; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (7) of the details of the Government's latest and future policies implemented

in respect of supporting deaf/hard-of-hearing persons?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Judiciary and government bureaux, I set out below a consolidated reply to the Member's question:

(1) (i) According to "Special Topics Report No. 63 – Persons with disabilities and chronic diseases" published by the Census and Statistics Department in December 2021, there were 47 900 persons with hearing difficulty in 2020, i.e. those who perceived themselves as having "a lot of long-term difficulty" in hearing or "cannot hear at all" with one ear or both ears even when using a hearing aid if necessary at the time of enumeration. In the same year, there were 246 200 persons who perceived themselves as having long-term difficulty in hearing in quiet environment or using specialised hearing aids/tools at the time of enumeration. The Government does not maintain relevant figures for the year 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022.

(ii) Number of persons with hearing impairment using the services of various government departments in the past five years is as follows:

€€	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Development Bureau	0	0	2	0	0
Education Bureau	770	730	850	1 040	900
Home Affairs Bureau / Home and Youth Affairs Bureau	0	0	0	2	0
Labour and Welfare Bureau	740	670	540	590	590
Buildings Department	7	14	6	10	3
Companies Registry	1	1	1	1	1
Customs and Excise Department	0	1	0	1	0
Home Affairs Department (Home Affairs Enquiry Centres)	8	15	25	57	27

Labour Department	516	443	433	477	421
Official Receiver's Office	0	0	1	0	0
Planning Department	1	2	21	1	0
Post Office	18	19	20	24	24
Rating and Valuation Department	0	0	2	2	3
Water Supplies Department	77	69	56	74	89

Other government departments do not maintain relevant statistics.

(iii) and (iv) In the past five years, the number of times persons with hearing impairment required the service of sign language interpreters when using the services of various government departments and the average time of each use of the service of sign language interpreters are as follows:

ã€€	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	Number of times (average time (around))				
Department of Health	24 (2 hours 23 mins)	59 (1 hour 54 mins)	34 (1 hour 23 mins)	35 (2 hours 2 mins)	42 (2 hours 8 mins)
Customs and Excise Department	0	1 (10 hours)	0	1 (2 hours)	0
Immigration Department	2 (5 hours)	1 (3 hours)	3 (7 hours)	3 (2 hours)	0
Labour Department	15 (3 hours 30 mins)	15 (3 hours 15 mins)	3 (4 hours 40 mins)	9 (4 hours 23 mins)	6 (3 hours 30 mins)
Leisure and Cultural Services Department	6 (1 hour 20 mins)	11 (1 hour 21 mins)	4 (1 hour 8 mins)	5 (1 hour 21 mins)	5 (1 hour 42 mins)

Other government departments do not maintain relevant statistics.

(2) Since October 2004, the Police have launched the 992 SMS emergency hotline for persons with hearing or speech impairments. The number of registered users with hearing or speech impairments and usage of the Police's 992 reporting system in the past five years are as follows:

ã€€	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of registered users	1 772	1 860	1 884	1 914	1 937
Number of emergency text messages	34	18	37	17	16

Regardless of the form of reporting for assistance, the Police will follow established procedures and rules, to immediately classify the case and dispatch appropriate Police officers to handle the request having regard to the seriousness of the case. The Police do not maintain statistics on the actual average time required between receiving a request and arrival of Police officers.

According to the priority of each case, the Police will arrange sign language interpreters for those who made a report at Police station with genuine needs as soon as possible. The Police do not maintain information on the average waiting time for sign language interpreters.

(3) At present, the public can report crimes through different means, such as uploading images and videos to the e-Report Room. As for processing photos and videos through the 992 emergency SMS service, the Police are going to launch the new generation Emergency Telephone System by updating the Fourth Generation of Command and Control Communications System, which includes a text, photo and video processing platform. This platform allows the public to send text, photo and video messages related to the reported crimes to the Police. This will also be applicable to the 992 reporting system to assist deaf or persons with hearing impairment to report crimes. The Police target to roll out the service within one to two years.

(4) To facilitate the administration of justice, sign language interpretation service is provided, as directed by the Court, to a witness or a party who has such a need in any court proceedings or part of any legal proceedings. To this end, the Judiciary Administration maintains a pool of experienced sign language freelance interpreters (FITs) who are engaged as and when necessary.

In the past five years, the number of sign language FITs in the pool and the number of bookings requesting sign language interpretation service are as follows:

ã€€	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
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Number of sign language FITs	10	12	17	15	15
Number of bookings requesting sign language interpretation service (Note)	119	118	141	79	100

Note: The majority are short hearings such as call-over, mention, pre-trial review, sentencing, plea, etc.

General information on sign language interpretation service, including the request form for the relevant service, are made public through the Judiciary's website, which will be updated as and when necessary.

(5) The Government adopts a dual-track mode in the implementation of special education. The Education Bureau will, subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and with parents' consent, refer students with more severe or multiple disabilities to aided special schools for intensive support services. Other students with special educational needs will attend ordinary schools for integrated education.

For students with hearing impairment, the Education Bureau has all along been encouraging schools to adopt appropriate modes to teach and to communicate with students having regard to their abilities and needs. Generally speaking, the speech reception and oral language-learning abilities of students with hearing impairment studying in ordinary schools are comparatively better. With the aid of hearing devices, they can acquire knowledge through the use of oral language, communicate with their teachers and schoolmates, and develop social skills and interpersonal relationship. Teachers will use oral language with the support of visual strategies, contextual cues, body language, written text, gestures, etc, in communicating with the students and in teaching.

The Education Bureau has been providing ordinary primary and secondary schools with additional resources (such as Learning Support Grant) to support students with hearing impairment. If schools consider it more appropriate to adopt sign language or combine the use of sign language to assist students in learning, they may deploy the additional resources holistically and flexibly for employing teachers or teaching assistants who know sign language, or hiring professional services including sign interpretation service to cater for the needs of students with hearing impairment.

Regarding education on sign language, the Education Bureau has all along been supporting the School for Children with Hearing Impairment to implement various projects of "Sign-assisted Instruction", including the "Development of New Vocabulary of Sign Language for New Senior Secondary Curriculum" programme and the "Removing Communication Barriers in Sign Language and Oral Language Holistic Support for Students with Hearing Impairment" programme, to continuously integrate and develop new sign vocabularies needed in teaching for teachers. The School has also developed the Visual Sign Language Dictionary website compiling daily and subject-based sign vocabularies for

public use. In addition, the School has set up a sign language teaching resources centre to provide consultation services for students, parents and teachers in need. The Education Bureau also encourages the School to strengthen the understanding of sign language among ordinary schools and the general public through various activities, such as "The Inter-school Sign-a-Song Contest", "Deaf Awareness Week", "Deaf Culture Day", sign language workshops and talks. The Education Bureau will continue to encourage the School to enhance the understanding of persons with hearing impairment and sign language among students, parents and teachers.

(6) and (7) The Government's policy objective is to create a barrier-free environment for persons with disabilities so that they can fully integrate into society. The Government has implemented the following measures in promoting sign language and supporting the persons with hearing impairment:

(i) in September 2015, the Labour and Welfare Bureau included sign language in the domain of language courses under the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) and accepted applications from course providers for registration of their sign language courses as CEF courses. At present, five relevant courses have been included in the Reimbursable Course List of the CEF. Moreover, in collaboration with the media, commercial, social welfare, public and education organisations, the Labour and Welfare Bureau implements diversified public education programmes, with a view to promoting the use of sign language and disability inclusive culture. These programmes include Sign Language Day, workshops, exhibitions, carnivals, video production, the set-up of a database on sign language, online tools/mobile app and other kits for learning sign language etc;

(ii) the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee and the Hong Kong Joint Council for People with Disabilities/Hong Kong Council of Social Service published the "List of Sign Language Interpreters in Hong Kong" (the List) in June 2016, which sets out the information of sign language interpreters (including professional qualifications, work experience and contact means) to facilitate organisations and the public to choose sign language interpretation services. The Labour and Welfare Bureau has informed all bureaux and departments to refer to the sign language interpreters on the List when engaging sign language interpretation services. Besides, the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee has also set up the Task Force on Promotion of Sign Language to advise the Government on the related work;

(iii) for school education, the Education Bureau will continue to adopt the dual-track mode in supporting students with hearing impairment and be committed to providing them with diverse and comprehensive support services. The Education Bureau will keep encouraging schools (including ordinary schools and the School for Children with Hearing Impairment) to adopt appropriate modes (including oral, sign and total communication) in teaching and communicating with students with hearing impairment having regard to their abilities and needs, so as to help them overcome their personal limitations, and enable them to grow up healthily and unleash their potential at different developmental stages;

(iv) on social services, the Social Welfare Department allocates subventions

to non-governmental organisations in operating two Multi-service Centres for Hearing Impaired Persons and four Social and Recreational Centres for the Disabled, which provide support services for persons with hearing impairment, including sign language interpretation to facilitate their communication with others and independent living in the community; and

(v) for dissemination of public information, the Information Services Department has been providing simultaneous sign language interpretation for the important press conferences, and all Government TV Announcements in the Public Interest have Chinese and English subtitles. Radio Television Hong Kong has been actively producing TV programmes which provide sign language interpretation, including broadcasting programmes with sign language interpretation for about four hours a week, introducing sign language and deaf culture, and adding sign language interpretation during live broadcasts of major events and sports events. Moreover, according to the directions issued by the Office of the Communications Authority, the three domestic free television programme service licensees are required to provide sign language interpretation and subtitles (news report with sign language) in the news report in the designated free television channel every day. While two licensees have been providing news report with sign language, the remaining licensee will provide such service by mid-August this year.