

LCQ18: Special work arrangements for government employees

Following is a question by the Hon Wilson Or Chong-shing and a written reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

To cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the Government implemented, on several occasions since early last year, special work arrangements (special arrangements) under which all government employees, save for those involved in the provision of emergency and essential public services, worked from home. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has assessed the impacts of the special arrangements on public services (including service efficiency and additional administrative costs incurred); if it has assessed, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as some members of the public have relayed that during the periods when the special arrangements were implemented, they could hardly access those public services urgently needed and had no way to contact the relevant government officers, whether the Government will issue standard guidelines to various government departments on matters such as staff rosters, work approaches and external liaison under the special arrangements, with a view to reducing the impacts of the special arrangements on members of the public; if not, of the reasons for that; and

(3) as I have learnt that during the periods when the special arrangements were implemented, some government employees were not assigned any work while staying at home, whether the Government will formulate plans so that when the special arrangements are implemented again in future due to an epidemic, such idle manpower may be deployed to support the anti-epidemic work of the Department of Health?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the various parts of Hon Wilson Or Chong-shing's question is as follows:

In order to reduce the risk of the virus spreading in the community and to break the chain of infection, the Government implements rigorous social distancing measures having regard to the epidemic situation, these include special work arrangements for government employees. The measure helps to significantly reduce the flow of people in the community and serves to

encourage employers to allow their staff members to work from home to further reduce the social contact. In implementing the arrangement, the Government requests individual bureaux and departments to deploy staff to suit their own modes of operation and make appropriate adjustments having regard to developing needs, such that in fighting the epidemic and safeguarding the safety of staff, the needs for the functioning of society are taken into account and public services are maintained. We reiterate that even under the epidemic, the Government has all along been maintaining emergency services and essential public services.

During the implementation of the special work arrangements for government employees, bureaux and departments kept the demand for public services under review and made flexible adjustments with reference to experience gained under previous rounds of special work arrangements and views from the public. For example, during the fourth wave of the epidemic, the Integrated Family Service Centres and Social Security Field Units of the Social Welfare Department have remained open to the public. The Licensing Offices of the Transport Department and the Hongkong Post have maintained services albeit on a limited scale. Job Centres of the Labour Department and the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency have provided enquiry and employment services by telephone and continued to process applications submitted by post, drop-in boxes or online respectively in view of the severity of the epidemic situation. To strike a better balance between fighting the epidemic and meeting the needs of a functioning society, the departments adjusted service arrangements and resumed counter services from January 21, 2021 onwards. Besides, we have all along been encouraging members of the public to use alternative means, such as the post, drop-in boxes or online channels to receive the services they need. Individual bureaux and departments have also made announcements on the latest arrangements of their services accordingly.

Government employees under the special work arrangements are not on vacation leave. Save for those involved in the provision of emergency services and essential public services, all other government employees must continue to work from home to minimise the risk of infection. Bureaux and departments have widely adopted information technology and provided appropriate facilities to enhance communication between staff. To support government employees to work from home, departments have procured additional computers and other mobile devices and equipment, computer software, and enhanced the capacities of their communications, networks, and databases according to their operational and staffing demands. As of end October 2020, about 7 900 additional members of staff (about 112 per cent) were provided with notebook computers for accessing departmental intranets and servers, and the number of staff authorised for using virtual private networks for working remotely increased by about 9 700 (about 147 per cent).

Over the past 13 months, bureaux and departments have demonstrated unprecedented collegiality and resilience in joining the anti-epidemic effort on different fronts. The various large-scale targeted measures introduced by the Government at different stages of the epidemic called for extensive manpower. These measures include the Universal Community Testing Programme,

close contact tracing, enforcement of compulsory testing in specified "restricted areas", Community Vaccination Programme, etc. The planning and organisation of these measures were completed within a short period of time with the manpower required deployed by various departments. Civil service colleagues are not only required to adopt flexible and innovative ways to respond to the needs of different service targets, but also to shoulder additional responsibilities which are outside the purview of their departments. As of early March 2021, more than 70 000 staff, including civil servants, contract staff and retired civil servants, have been engaged in the implementation of various anti-epidemic programmes and operations. The Government will, depending on the development of the epidemic situation and actual needs, continue to flexibly deploy manpower to support the anti-epidemic effort, and do our best to enable the lives of all people and our economic activities to return to normalcy at the soonest.