

LCQ19: Assisting institutions in enhancing application of information technology

Following is a question by the Hon Charles Mok and a written reply by the Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Mr Alfred Sit, in the Legislative Council today (November 4):

Question:

The Government has implemented a Distance Business Programme (the Programme) under the Anti-epidemic Fund to support enterprises to continue their businesses and provide services during the epidemic through the adoption of information technology (IT) solutions. The Programme has been open for funding applications since May 18, 2020. On August 18, the Government introduced enhancement measures for the Programme so that social enterprises not holding a Business Registration Certificate may still be eligible for application if they submit a Social Enterprises Certificate issued by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service under the Programme. However, some operators of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social enterprises have relayed that the application procedure of the Programme is time-consuming and cumbersome, making it difficult for them to benefit from the Programme. On assisting NGOs and social enterprises in enhancing the application of IT, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of funding applications received under the Programme since August 18 from NGOs and social enterprises, broken down by the type of supporting document they hold (i.e. Social Enterprises Certificate and Business Registration Certificate);

(2) whether it will consider streamlining the application as well as vetting and approval procedures of the Programme to facilitate the filing of applications by NGOs and social enterprises; and

(3) of the other measures in place to assist NGOs and social enterprises in enhancing the application of IT?

Reply:

President,

The Government has implemented the Distance Business Programme (the Programme) under the Anti-epidemic Fund to support enterprises to continue their businesses and provide services during the epidemic through the adoption of information technology (IT) solutions. The Innovation and Technology Commission (ITC) is responsible for implementing the Programme, and the Hong Kong Productivity Council (HKPC) is the Secretariat of the Programme. The Programme has been open for funding application since May 18,

2020. All private enterprises (excluding publicly listed companies, statutory bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) funded by the Government) with a valid Business Registration Certificate, ongoing business commenced before January 1, 2020 and substantive business operation in the industry related to the project in the application at the time of application are eligible to apply.

Our reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) To further support enterprises to develop distance business during the epidemic, the ITC introduced a number of enhancement measures on August 18, including allowing social enterprises without Business Registration Certificate to submit funding applications if they could obtain the Social Enterprises Certificate issued by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS). The HKCSS has issued a total of 29 Social Enterprises Certificates.

The Programme has received 16 funding applications submitted by social enterprises with a Social Enterprises Certificate. The Secretariat has not kept any statistics on the funding applications submitted by social enterprises using a Business Registration Certificate.

(2) The Programme has been facilitating the submission of funding applications by enterprises (including social enterprises) through various measures, including establishing an online system for enterprises to submit applications, updating the dedicated website of the Programme regularly to provide enterprises with the latest information, organising around 30 webinars to explain the application procedures, case examples and points to note on submitting applications, as well as providing a hotline and an email address for enterprises to make enquiries.

To expedite the processing and vetting of applications, the Secretariat has actively increased its manpower to handle applications, adopted automation software to accelerate the processing of documents, and further upgraded the online system to allow enterprises to manage their applications, including checking their application status and submitting supplementary documents, more conveniently and efficiently.

The Programme was closed for applications on October 31. A total of 38 572 applications have been received, of which 11 125 were submitted within the last ten days of the application period. 20 772 applications have been processed, of which 19 120 had been approved with a total funding of around \$1.1 billion. We will complete the processing of the remaining applications as soon as practicable.

(3) The Government and relevant statutory bodies have a range of measures to assist NGOs and social enterprises in the application of IT, including –

(i) The HKPC launched a five-year 'Jockey Club IT Support Programme for NGOs' (www.jcitngo.org/) with the support of the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust in December 2019 to provide IT consultancy and consultancy services to eligible NGOs, with an aim of encouraging NGOs to make good use

of technology, improve operation, and enhance service efficiency;

(ii) The Government launched in December 2018 the \$1 billion 'Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care' (the Fund) (www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/site_pubsvc/page_supportser/sub_itfund/) to subsidise eligible elderly and rehabilitation service units to procure, rent or try out technology products with a view to improving the quality of life of service users and reducing the burden and pressure of care staff and carers. Thus far, three tranches of grants totalling over \$200 million have been approved for procuring or renting over 4 200 items of various technology (including IT) products. NGOs can also make use of the Government subvention to acquire the necessary equipment and software to provide services through tele-practice; moreover, the Social Welfare Department has provided subsidies for NGOs operating subsidised elderly and rehabilitation services to employ 1 000 time-limited staff to adapt to and promote the use of technology, such as tele-practice;

(iii) In the category of Smart People Award in the Hong Kong ICT Awards, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer particularly encourages enterprises and organisations (including NGOs and social enterprises) to develop innovative IT products or solutions;

(iv) The Innovation and Technology Fund for Better Living (fbl.itb.gov.hk/) under the Innovation and Technology Bureau encourages and subsidises social service organisations to combine innovative ideas with technology application to take care of the needs of special groups; and

(v) The Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Fund (www.sie.gov.hk/en/) under the Efficiency Office seeks to nurture and support social innovators, including NGOs and social enterprises, to alleviate poverty and social exclusion in Hong Kong through innovative solutions. Quite a number of the funded projects involve the application of IT.