

# LCQ19: Support for sports, performing arts, culture and publication sectors

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Fok and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Jack Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 23):

Question:

Some members of the sports, performing arts, culture and publication sectors have relayed that the Government's repeated tightening of the anti-epidemic measures under the new wave of epidemic has forced the cancellation of activities such as live performances and sports events, as well as the closure of venues such as cinemas and fitness rooms, causing their sectors to suffer great losses. As the epidemic situation has become so severe recently, they cannot see any definite time for the resumption of their businesses. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the tightening of the anti-epidemic measures has rendered the tremendous efforts and time the sectors spent on planning, producing/rehearsing and promoting their performances and movies in vain, and has seriously affected the livelihoods of the practitioners concerned,

(i) whether it has gained an understanding from performing groups and members of the film industry about their difficulties and needs, so as to provide them with more targeted and immediate assistance; and

(ii) whether it will consider setting up a special task force to help the affected performing groups to stage their performances again, including allowing restricted opening of performance venues for such groups to conduct rehearsals, as well as assisting them in switching their performances to stage online;

(2) given that the risks of infection of some activities (including sports activities) are relatively lower (e.g. tennis players keeping quite a great distance from each other when playing the sport), whether the Government will drop the current practice of closing all venues and cancelling all activities on an across-the-board basis, and establish a mechanism whereby scientific methods are adopted for analysing the risks of infection of different activities, thereby formulating proportionate social distancing measures for the sectors;

(3) given that the livelihoods of quite a number of practitioners and the businesses of quite a number of organisations in the sectors (including sports referees, non-professional league players, non elite athletes and coaches, as well as movie distributors) have been badly affected by the epidemic, whether the Government will roll out more measures to provide them with assistance, so as to prevent wastage of talents in the sectors; and

(4) as some members of the performing sector and the film industry have pointed out that an attendance rate of less than 70 per cent will incur losses, whether the Government will, upon the implementation of the "vaccine pass", (i) maintain the cap for attendance rate at 85 per cent as that in force prior to the tightening of the anti-epidemic measures so as to ensure the income of the sectors, and (ii) allow cinemas to resume the selling of snacks according to the epidemic prevention standards for catering premises so as to enable them to maintain their important source of income?

Reply:

President,

After consulting the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB), my consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Kenneth Fok is as follows:

(1)(i) Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) has allocated more than \$350 million from six rounds of the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) for launching the Arts and Culture Sector Subsidy Scheme and deployed more than \$20 million of its own resources to support the arts and cultural sector. Regarding performing arts groups and companies in the performing industry, the HAB has maintained close liaison, either directly or through relevant departments and statutory bodies, with them, so as to devise targeted support measures in a timely manner to assist these arts groups to tide over the difficult times under the pandemic. Relevant measures are as follows:

(a) First Round of the AEF – provision of subsidy to the nine major performing arts groups (MPAGs) amounting eight per cent of their recurrent subvention (amounting to about \$30 million in total), provision of \$16.8 million to the Hong Kong Arts Festival Society as well as the provision of two rounds of subsidies of \$80,000 per round to each of the venue partners (VPs) under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), grantees of the Arts Capacity Development Funding Scheme (ACDFS) and arts groups funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) (amounting to about \$15 million in total);

(b) Third, Fifth and Sixth Rounds of the AEF – provision of subsidies to eligible companies in the performing industry amounting to \$100,000, \$50,000 and \$100,000 respectively (amounting to about \$20 million in total);

(c) Fifth and Sixth Rounds of the AEF – provision of subsidies to the nine MPAGs, VPs under the LCSD, grantees of the ACDFS and arts groups funded by the HKADC amounting to \$40,000 and \$80,000 respectively (amounting to about \$13 million in total); and

(d) The HAB's own resources – provision of additional subsidy of \$80,000 in December 2020 to arts groups funded by the HKADC, each of the VPs under the LCSD and grantees of the ACDFS (amounting to about \$7.8 million in total).

The Government will continue to communicate closely with performing arts

groups and collaborate with different policy bureaux, departments and statutory bodies, with a view to ensuring that performing arts groups would receive appropriate assistance.

As for the film sector, the CEDB understands the adverse impact of the pandemic on the film industry. When formulating measures to support the local film industry, the CEDB has all along consulted the Hong Kong Film Development Council and the trade, and invited relevant stakeholders to provide views on the implementation details, in order to ensure that the measures are practical and can benefit practitioners of different disciplines in the industry. The Government has launched five major measures, including Directors' Succession Scheme; relaxation of the Film Production Financing Scheme; the Scriptwriting Incubation Programme; short-term advanced training programmes; and the enhanced First Feature Film Initiative, under the Film Development Fund (FDF) to boost the volume of local film production, nurture young directors and scriptwriting talents and enhance professional training, so as to add value to and provide employment opportunities for practitioners of various disciplines in the film industry and retain talents. These support measures are well received by the film industry. The sector considers that the support measures are useful and sustainable, and have increased the number of high-quality local film productions and nurtured more film specialists, thereby benefitting both the sector and practitioners of different film professions.

In the past two years, the Government has financed a total of 28 local film production projects through the FDF, and the expenditure/committed funding of the five major measures abovementioned has reached \$160 million. Although the FDF does not directly subsidise individual companies or film practitioners, the CEDB will continue to support film-related projects through these schemes to increase the number of local film productions and provide more employment and development opportunities for the film practitioners at different positions.

In view of the severe pandemic, the Government announced a series of tightened social distancing measures, including the mandatory closure of cinemas since January 7, 2022. To help the affected cinemas tide over this difficult period, the Government rolled out the Cinemas Subsidy Scheme (the Scheme) under the fifth round of the AEF. A one-off subsidy of \$50,000 per screen was provided to each existing cinema licensed as a place of public entertainment with commercial operation in December 2021 with the maximum subsidy for a cinema circuit capped at \$1.5 million. Operators of all eligible cinemas in Hong Kong have applied for and benefitted from the Scheme, with all the subsidies disbursed in end-January 2022. With the continuation of the social distancing measures, the Government launched the Scheme again under the sixth round of the AEF. The subsidy amount for each screen and the maximum subsidy for a cinema circuit are doubled to \$100,000 and \$3 million respectively.

In addition, film productions have inevitably been hindered by the pandemic and various social distancing measures, affecting especially self-employed/freelance film practitioners. The postponement or cancellation of major celebration events originally scheduled for this period has also

significantly reduced job opportunities for pyrotechnics and special effects operators. We have thus introduced measures under the sixth round of the AEF to provide a one-off subsidy of \$10,000 to each eligible special effects operator and assistant, and self-employed/freelance film practitioner.

(1)(ii) Relevant bureaux and departments have all along worked closely to provide assistance to the affected performing arts groups in a systematic manner. Owing to venue closures caused by the pandemic, the LCSD has made arrangements for hirers to reschedule their programmes or obtain a refund, together with a reduction in hire charges (including a 75 per cent reduction of basic hire charges of facilities in the LCSD civic centres). Noting the prevailing trend of making recorded or online programmes as a result of the pandemic, the LCSD has also provided a 75 per cent reduction of related charges for livestreaming and recording purposes. To help alleviate the hardships encountered by the performing arts sector and to encourage their organisation of large-scale cultural and entertainment programmes for the general public after the pandemic, the LCSD will reduce the percentage levied on gross tickets proceeds from 20 per cent to 10 per cent for a period of 28 months with effect from the date when the major facilities of four performance venues concerned resume operation at full seating capacity. The four venues are the Hong Kong Coliseum, the Queen Elizabeth Stadium, the Hong Kong Cultural Centre and the Hong Kong City Hall.

Regarding re-staging of performances, as far as programmes presented and sponsored by the LCSD are concerned, the LCSD has been communicating closely with those performing arts groups being affected so as to cope with their adjusted plans, including the change of programme format from live performance to online programme. In addition, the LCSD will also suitably adjust the production cost based on the arts groups' genuine need to cover the actual expenses incurred and extra cost due to the delay and change of programme format.

(2) In view of the development of the epidemic situation, the Government announced the tightening of social distancing measures on January 5, 2022 with a view to reducing public traffic, social functions and crowd gatherings to the greatest extent. This served to curb the spread of the virus in the community through discouraging members of the public from going out and joining activities unnecessarily. The Secretary for Food and Health directed under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) (the Regulation) that more than ten types of scheduled premises, including fitness centres, sports premises and swimming pools) must suspend operation starting from January 7, 2022.

The Government has always supported sports development in Hong Kong and recognises the importance of exercise to health. In fact, when sports facilities were ordered to close or allowed to reopen, the Government had considered the risks of the related activities and arranged their closure and reopening in a gradual and orderly manner. For example, when the third wave of epidemic situation subsided, outdoor venues for individual sports (including running tracks in sports ground, tennis court, golf course and driving range, bowling greens and archery range etc) were the first batch of

scheduled premises allowed for reopening in late August 2020 whereas other sports premises (including indoor premises for individual sports and both indoor and outdoor premises for team sports) were subsequently reopened in September 2020 by phases. Besides, during the beginning of the fourth wave of the pandemic, several types of scheduled premises were required to close from November 26, 2020 as directed under the Regulation whereas sports premises, fitness centres and swimming pools were only required to close on December 10, 2020. Subsequently, when the epidemic situation improved, sports premises were the first batch of scheduled premises allowed to reopen, enabling members of the public to exercise while keeping social distance. The outdoor venues for individual sports were reopened on February 4, 2021, followed by other sports premises on February 18, 2021.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation, and review and adjust the various measures in place from time to time with a view to striking a balance among disease prevention and control, public health, economic needs and level of acceptance of the society. We will consider reopening sports facilities in a gradual and orderly manner when situation allows.

(3) Due to closure of sports venues managed by the LCSD, schools and sports venues managed by sports organisations, most recreational training and activities have to be cancelled. The Government launched the One-off Grant to Registered Sports Coaches (the Grant) under the AEF to provide immediate financial support to coaches whose income rely on sports coaching.

The Grant under the LCSD is designed for registered sports coaches engaged in sports training or activities. Instructors who are employed by schools or social welfare institutions engaging in interest group training or activities could apply for other one-off grants under various rounds of the AEF administered by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) or the Education Bureau (EDB), regardless of whether they are registered coaches under national sports associations (NSAs). Registration under an NSA is not a prerequisite of the aforementioned grants under the SWD or the EDB.

In addition, in order to alleviate the impact of the pandemic to staff employed in recreational and sports activities organised or subsidised by the LCSD, including the LCSD part-time staff; or sports coaches and other recreational and sports staff, including referees, engaged by NSAs or sports organisations (SO) for organising events under the Sports Subvention Scheme; or for services purchased from NSAs or SO through the LCSD's Direct Purchase Authority Management System, assistance was provided to these sports coaches and all recreational and sports staff in the form of ex-gratia payment, which was equitant to the full amount of service gratuities they would otherwise be entitled to during the impacted period. A total of \$104.1 million has been distributed since the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020.

The Government will continue to maintain communication with the sports sector, and will ensure that the sports sector can receive appropriate support through collaboration with various bureaux, departments and NSAs.

(4) The LCSD has been closely monitoring the latest development of the

pandemic and preparing to reopen venues for live performances with the prime considerations of public health, including the health and safety of the audience, performers and staff. The performance venues under the LCSD are places of public entertainment among the scheduled premises. The reopening arrangement of these venues and seating arrangements have to comply with the directions of the Regulation and Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition of Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G). The LCSD will continue to closely monitor the situation and review the relevant arrangements, including consulting the health authority for professional advice on the implementation of anti-epidemic measures.

Separately, the Government understands the difficulties of cinema operators under the pandemic and have repeatedly appealed to landlords in the private sector to reduce rental and ride out the difficult times with their tenants. The CEDB will liaise closely with the trade and keep tabs of the latest epidemic situation, with a view to introducing practicable measures that facilitates the development of the sector under the premise of safeguarding public health.