

LCQ2: Efficiency in policy implementation

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr James Lau, in the Legislative Council today (October 31):

Question:

In March this year, the Financial Secretary announced the rolling out of a Caring and Sharing Scheme, under which \$4,000 will be disbursed to those members of the public who are not required to pay salaries tax for the preceding year, and for those members of the public whose benefits from concessions in salaries tax and rates are less than \$4,000 in total, an amount of money will be disbursed to them to make up for the difference. The Government expected that the application arrangements for the Scheme would be announced before the end of this year and the Scheme would be open for applications in February next year at the earliest, but no progress has been heard so far. I have learnt that the office under the Working Family Allowance Office responsible for implementing the Scheme has yet to be set up, and the relevant computer programme is still under development. Quite a number of members of the public have complained that the slow implementation of the Scheme has given them an impression that the Government is quick to collect taxes but slow to disburse payments and that the administrative efficiency of the bureaucracy is too low. Regarding efficiency in policy implementation, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the implementation progress of the Scheme (including the setting up of the office and the development of the computer programme) is behind schedule; whether it will expedite the relevant work so as to implement the Scheme as early as possible and to receive applications and disburse payments on an earlier date;

(2) whether, in the light of the situation that the implementation of the Scheme has taken an excessively long time and thereby has fallen short of the public's expectation, the Government will comprehensively review its efficiency in policy implementation; and

(3) given that it has been announced in the Policy Address delivered recently that the Government will spend about \$7 billion on the construction of a civil service college, whether it has plans to provide civil servants with specialised training courses in the areas of enhancing the efficiency of policy implementation, strengthening inter-departmental collaboration as well as avoiding the lack of coordination and shirking of responsibilities among various government departments, etc.?

Reply:

President,

The Financial Secretary announced on March 23 this year the introduction of the Caring and Sharing Scheme to share the fruits of our economic success with more people in the community. A person who meets the relevant eligibility criteria may apply for a maximum of \$4,000. The Working Family Allowance Office (WFAO) is responsible for implementing the Scheme and will accept applications from February 2019 at the earliest.

Having consulted the relevant policy bureaux and departments, my reply to the questions raised by the Hon Paul Tse is as follows:

(1) and (2) Since the announcement of the Scheme in March this year, the WFAO has been actively undertaking the planning and preparatory work for the Scheme. First of all, a 24-hour telephone hotline has been established to receive public enquiries and a comprehensive list of frequently asked questions have been uploaded to the WFAO's website to address questions about the Scheme from the public. Other tasks include formulating the mode of operation of the Scheme as well as developing operational manuals and guidelines, application procedures and payment arrangements, etc. Concurrently, the WFAO needs to put in place the relevant administrative arrangements including the setting up of a new office, the development of information technology (IT) systems and installation of office automation facilities, and the recruitment of some 700 additional contract staff with training provided to process an anticipated influx of applications of about 3 000 000 applicants at maximum, etc.

To set up a new office, the WFAO has identified an office premises in the urban area, which is currently rented to another government department but will soon be vacated. The new office will handle applications under the Scheme. As for the development and installation of different IT systems, as well as manpower recruitment and training, the current progress has been largely satisfactory. The WFAO is now taking forward various tasks according to the planned schedule.

After the announcement of the Scheme in March, the WFAO has been pursuing various tasks promptly in a proactive and pragmatic manner. It needs to recruit and train additional staff to cater for the anticipated influx of millions of applications. Moreover, to streamline the application process, computer systems with specific functions are required to facilitate verification by departments such as the WFAO, the Inland Revenue Department and the Land Registry, etc. In view of this, it will take some time for the WFAO to complete all the preparatory and administrative work so as to ensure smooth processing of applications and payment. Judging from the current progress, we expect that the Scheme will be open for applications from February 2019 at the earliest, which is in line with the planned schedule. The WFAO will announce the details of the application arrangement at the end of this year.

All government departments have been pushing forward various policies proactively and in a concerted manner; and will continue to work together to

enhance efficiency in governance with a view to facilitating the early implementation of initiatives beneficial to the public.

(3) Regarding the civil service college, the Chief Executive announced in her Policy Address this year that a new civil service college is expected to be completed in 2026. The new college with fully upgraded training facilities will provide enhanced training for civil servants in various areas so as to ensure that our civil servants keep improving with the latest changes and providing better quality services to the public. Pending the commissioning of the new college, the Civil Service Bureau will continue to enhance civil service training. The existing training programmes for civil servants have already covered areas on leadership development, public policy and public engagement, etc. Through case analysis and interactive learning, participating civil servants would gain more in-depth knowledge of the challenges in different policy areas and the ways to strengthen co-operation among various departments and would, in turn, enhance work efficiency and deliver outstanding performance in the Government's roles as a service provider, regulator, facilitator and promoter.

Thank you, President.