

LCQ20: Health screening work conducted by Department of Health at various boundary control points

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Fok and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (March 26):

Question:

There are views in the community that following the comprehensive lifting of immigration-related epidemic preventions and control measures, manpower deployment of the Department of Health (DH) to conduct health screening at various boundary control points (BCPs) is excessive, and that as the Government has already installed infra-red thermo-imaging machines at all BCPs, DH should actively explore leveraging artificial intelligence technology to enhance quarantine efficiency at BCPs. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Government has reviewed the current staffing arrangements for health screening at various BCPs, and conducted regular assessments to ensure that the number of DH officers deployed at various BCPs is commensurate with needs, thereby avoiding potential wastage of manpower and public funds; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) of the average daily number of officers deployed by DH to conduct body temperature screening of travellers at various BCPs in each of the past five years, with a breakdown by BCP as set out in the table below;

BCP	2020	2024

(3) as it is learnt that the Government has installed body temperature screening facilities (including infra-red thermo-imaging machines) at all BCPs, of the relevant expenditure incurred in the past five years, including expenditure on the procurement of equipment, repair and maintenance, and operation;

(4) whether it has assessed the current operational status of the body temperature screening facilities at various BCPs (including whether their technical advantages have been maximised), and whether complementary measures have been adopted to reduce reliance on manual body temperature screening; whether the authorities have formulated plans to further enhance the effectiveness of the body temperature screening facilities at various BCPs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) as it is learnt that mobile robots for smart fever screening developed by

local innovation and technology companies have been trialed and used by government departments in recent years, whether the authorities have plans to introduce more advanced technologies (including smart body temperature screening systems) in the future and apply them at various BCPs, thereby achieving a better balance between manpower deployment and use of smart equipment, while at the same time enhancing screening efficiency and improving the arrangements for health screening work?

Reply:

President,

In accordance with the power conferred by the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance of Hong Kong and with regard to the guidelines of the International Health Regulations, the Department of Health (DH) enforces various preventive measures at boundary control points (BCPs) to prevent the introduction or spreading of infectious diseases into or out of Hong Kong. The Port Health Division under the DH carries out health screening work at each BCP (including conducting regular body temperature screening for arrivals and setting up health stations). Taking into account the design of each BCP and its traveller and vehicle flow, the Port Health Division deploys appropriate manpower to conduct body temperature screening for all arrivals; and performs, in accordance to the mechanism, further health assessments for travellers with confirmed fever or in need (such as travellers who self-reported being unwell) to understand their symptoms, travel history, contact history, etc., in order to make appropriate referrals and follow-up, including compulsory referral of persons with suspected infection of major infectious diseases to Hong Kong public hospitals for checking, suggesting other travellers with fever or in need to seek medical treatment at medical institutions with issuance of referral letters, and assisting persons in need to call for ambulance service for further treatment at Accident and Emergency Department.

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government has been maintaining close co-operation with entry-exit health inspection and quarantine authorities of the Mainland to safeguard the well-being and safety of residents and travellers of the two places. The Health Bureau and the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (GACC) signed the Co-operation Arrangement for Entry-exit Health Inspection and Quarantine between the GACC and the Health Bureau of the HKSAR Government in 2023. Under the normalisation arrangements for epidemic prevention and control, the two parties agreed to focus on the health inspection and quarantine of their respective inbound personnel travelling between the HKSAR and the Mainland BCPs.

The HKSAR Government will maintain close liaison with the relevant Mainland authorities and actively review the entry health inspection and quarantine arrangements (including temperature screening) from the public health perspective, taking into account factors such as cost-effectiveness and appropriateness.

The reply, in consultation with the DH, to the question raised by the

Hon Kenneth Fok's questions is as follows:

(1), (4) and (5) Ongoing health screening is an important element to safeguard public health and can help to identify potential infectious diseases to be imported into Hong Kong at an early stage. Currently, all BCPs between Hong Kong and the Mainland implement health screening measures for inbound travellers.

The DH mainly deploys Infrared Thermal Imaging System at various BCPs to detect the body temperatures of multiple travellers simultaneously in order to reduce the manpower required for related work. However, drivers and all passengers in a cross-boundary private car can remain in the vehicle while passing through the kiosks of the Immigration Department, the Customs and Excise Department, and the DH without the need to get off from the vehicle or go to the traveller's clearance hall. Therefore, due to site constraints, the Infrared Thermal Imaging System cannot be used to measure the forehead temperature of drivers and passengers passing through the vehicle lanes. Therefore, the DH staff uses hand-held infrared thermometers to measure the body temperature of inbound passengers on board the vehicles at the DH vehicle kiosks.

The DH reviews the health screening arrangements from time to time and deploys appropriate manpower at various BCPs according to actual circumstances to provide appropriate services for inbound travellers. For instance, the extra personnel deployed during the COVID-19 epidemic with regard to actual need have been reduced after the epidemic, and the manpower at relevant BCPs has basically returned to the pre-epidemic level. Meanwhile, the DH also keeps a close eye on technological development and actively explores the adoption of other innovative technology with the co-operation of other departments at BCPs to reduce the manpower need for health screening and optimise the use of human resources.

(2) From 2020 to 2024, the average daily number of health screening shifts of the DH at various BCPs (some health screening posts involve more than one shift according to the operation of BCPs) are as follows:

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Airport	270	244	226	125	122
Lo Wu	40	0	0	40	40
Lok Ma Chau Spur Line	30	0	0	30	30
Lok Ma Chau	90	90	111	94	94
Man Kam To	27	27	41	36	36
Sha Tau Kok	37	37	20	8	0
Shenzhen Bay	137	171	182	116	94
Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge	141	178	178	116	130
Heung Yuen Wai	28	28	28	68	58
Express Rail Link West Kowloon	6	6	31	51	51

Hung Hom	18	18	18	0	0
Macau Ferry Terminal	42	42	45	45	45
China Ferry Terminal	22	22	0	22	22
Total	888	863	880	751	722

The DH redeploys health screening posts according to actual circumstances. For posts in some BCPs suspended operation would be redeployed to other BCPs.

Health screening service of Kai Tak Cruise Terminal and Ocean Terminal were not included as they were only provided during stopover of cruises.

(3) The Electrical and Mechanical Services Department is responsible for the procurement and maintenance of the Infrared Thermal Imaging System installed by the DH at various BCPs. The recurrent expenditure incurred in the past five financial years is as follows:

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
HK\$ million				
1.73	2.24	2.65	2.65	2.76