

LCQ12: Labour importation schemes

Following is a question by the Hon Jimmy Ng and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (June 19):

Question:

To alleviate manpower shortage across different sectors, the Government has successively launched a number of labour importation schemes, including the Enhanced Supplementary Labour Scheme (ESLS), the Special Scheme to Import Care Workers for Residential Care Homes, the Labour Importation Scheme for the Construction Sector and the Labour Importation Scheme for the Transport Sector. Employers of different sectors have relayed to me their hope that the Government can expedite the vetting and approval procedures for the aforesaid schemes, while at the same time making arrangements for the relevant schemes to accept online applications. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of applications under the various aforesaid labour importation schemes that have met the target processing time and those that have not, as well as the reasons for not meeting the target processing time;

(2) given that the Labour Importation Scheme for the Construction Sector and the Labour Importation Scheme for the Transport Sector have yet to accept online applications, whether the authorities will develop an online application system to enable employers to submit applications online; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) given that in the reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council on the Estimates of Expenditure 2024-2025, the Government has indicated that the Supplementary Labour Division of the Labour Department (LD) will recruit additional manpower in that financial year to assist in the implementation of the ESLS, whether the LD will recruit additional manpower to assist in handling other sector-specific labour importation schemes; if so, of the details, as well as the staff establishment and expenditure involved;

(4) whether it will study increasing the labour importation quotas for other sector-specific labour importation schemes; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) given that according to government information, as at April 30 this year, the numbers of imported workers approved for some job categories under the ESLS were relatively small, for example, the ESLS received applications from employers for importing 269 washers, 582 drivers and 165 spray paint workers, while the LD approved applications for importing only 10 washers and one driver, and none of the applications for importing spray paint workers was approved, of the reasons for the relatively low approval rates for such

trades;

(6) whether it has compiled statistics on the respective numbers of employers using the Application Form for Common Posts and the Application Form for Non-Common Posts to submit applications under the ESLS; whether the Government will amend the Application Form for Common Posts to include more posts; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(7) given that since the launch of the ESLS on September 4 last year, the LD has suspended the general exclusion of the 26 job categories as well as unskilled or low-skilled posts from labour importation under the Supplementary Labour Scheme for two years, whether such measure will be extended or regularised; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

To cope with the challenges brought by manpower shortage and on the premise of ensuring employment priority for local workers, the Government has enhanced the mechanism for importation of labour. On June 19, 2023, the Labour and Welfare Bureau introduced the Special Scheme to Import Care Workers for the Residential Care Homes (Care Workers Scheme). On July 17, 2023, the Development Bureau (DEVB) and the Transport and Logistics Bureau (TLB) respectively launched sector-specific labour importation schemes for the construction and transport sectors. In addition, the Labour Department (LD) has implemented the Enhanced Supplementary Labour Scheme (ESLS) since September 4, 2023 to enhance the coverage and operation of the Supplementary Labour Scheme (SLS) including suspending the general exclusion of the 26 job categories as well as unskilled or low-skilled posts from labour importation for two years, with a view to alleviating the manpower shortage of other sectors.

In consultation with the DEVB and the TLB, our reply to the Hon Jimmy Ng's questions is as follows:

(1) The Care Workers Scheme has completed three rounds of quota allocation and received 1 261 applications. All applications were vetted within two months as planned, and is shorter than the vetting time of around five months for previous applications under the SLS.

The Labour Importation Scheme for the Construction Sector (Construction Scheme) accepts applications quarterly. As at May 2024, vetting of the first three rounds of 77 received applications was completed. All applications were vetted within the target of two months after the closing of each application period.

For the Labour Importation Scheme for the Transport Sector – Aviation Industry (Aviation Scheme), 57 applications were received in the first round and second round. Vetting of the two rounds of applications was completed within the target time (i.e. in about two weeks' time).

For the Labour Importation Scheme for the Transport Sector – Public Light Bus/Coach Trade (Transport Scheme), 118 applications were received in the first round of applications and vetting was completed within two months as planned. The second round of applications ended on April 26, 2024 and it is envisaged that the vetting will be completed in around two months after the closing of application period.

As for the ESLS, 4 939 applications were received as at June 6, 2024. The LD has implemented a series of new measures including introducing an application form for common posts and assigning a designated team for processing, with a view to expediting the preliminary screening for commencement of the four-week local open recruitment; deploying staff specialised in screening applications submitted by employers, and reminding employers as soon as possible if the information in the application forms is incomplete or lacks the required supporting documents; exercising flexibility in handling recruitment advertisements during the four-week local recruitment and not requiring the employers to extend the local recruitment period as far as possible, and expediting the follow-up on interview results; and organising briefings for employment agencies involved in labour importation matters and explaining the application arrangements of the ESLS to facilitate employment agencies to assist employers in the handling of applications etc, to expedite the processing of applications. Upon receipt of all information required for processing and after screening-in of the applications, the LD can generally complete the vetting of the applications under the ESLS within three months.

(2) The Care Workers Scheme accepts applications submitted by electronic forms. Since the launch of the Construction Scheme, the application process (including application submission methods) has been operating smoothly. The DEVB had already considered setting up an online electronic application form when formulating the Scheme and is taking forward the work as scheduled. Since the launch of the Aviation Scheme, the application and vetting process has been smooth. The Airport Authority Hong Kong (AAHK) will keep in view the application and assessment of the Aviation Scheme and adjust the arrangement when appropriate. As for the Transport Scheme, it is a common practice for the Public Light Bus (PLB) and coach trade to submit applications by post or in person. The current mode of application is smooth and therefore there is no plan to develop an online application system at this stage.

(3) The Supplementary Labour Division of the LD is responsible for implementing the ESLS while relevant bureaux/departments are responsible for implementing sector-specific labour importation schemes and the Care Workers Scheme. If necessary, relevant bureaux/departments will apply for additional resources in accordance with the established mechanism.

(4) The prevailing overall importation quota under the Care Workers Scheme is capped at 7 000, including around 4 000 care workers previously imported under the SLS and around 3 000 additional new quotas. So far, nearly all 3 000 additional quotas have been approved through the three rounds of allocation, with 2 200 quota applications declined due to exhaustion of

quotas. The Government is examining the manpower supply of and demand for care workers in the residential care home sector, and reviewing the overall quota of the Care Workers Scheme as appropriate on the premise of safeguarding the employment priority for local workers.

Since the implementation of the Construction Scheme last July, the DEVB has been listening to the feedback of stakeholders through the Consultative Committee under the Scheme. Overall speaking, members agreed that the Scheme has been implemented smoothly and its operation has been effective. At present, the DEVB will make good use of the quotas and through multi-pronged measures, including enhancing local training and recruiting new blood to join the industry and promoting the use of applied technology to uplift the overall productivity and tackle the manpower need of the construction industry; and at the same time closely monitor the implementation progress of the Scheme and the manpower forecast of the construction industry by the Construction Industry Council, as well as reviewing the situation of the industry to ensure the Scheme moves with the times.

As for the Aviation Scheme, the flight handling capacity of the Hong Kong International Airport is expected to gradually rise after the commissioning of the Three-Runway System. It is expected that the manpower demand of the airport will also increase gradually. The AAHK will conduct a fresh round of airport manpower survey this year to review the manpower situation of the airport community. The TLB will make reference to the survey results as well as the implementation of the Aviation Scheme etc, to consider the way forward of the Scheme.

For the Transport Scheme, 969 quotas were approved in the first round of applications. As at end May this year, about 600 drivers had arrived in Hong Kong to undergo driving training and take driving test, and started work by phases. The Transport Department (TD) is now processing the second round of applications. The TD will maintain communication with relevant transport trade associations and labour representatives through the stakeholder consultative group, closely monitor the implementation of the Transport Scheme and the manpower need of PLB and coach drivers, and review the Scheme when appropriate.

(5) The time required to process each ESLS application is affected by a number of factors, including whether the applicant employer has provided sufficient information or has requested changes to the application details during processing; whether the LD needs to consult relevant bureaux and/or departments on the applied posts to obtain policy support on labour importation and to ensure the applied posts fulfil other relevant regulations. If the post under application involves new types of work or special skills, the LD will need more time to consult relevant bureaux and/or departments, training institutions, professional bodies, etc, to determine the reasonable salary, entry requirements and scope of work etc.

As mentioned in the reply to Part (1), the LD has implemented a series of new measures to expedite the processing of the ESLS applications.

(6) Since the introduction of the Application Form for Common Posts and Application Form for Non-common Posts on May 2, 2024, the ESLS received 699 applications as at June 6, 2024, of which 267 were submitted by Application Form for Common Posts and 31 were submitted by Application Form for Non-common Posts. The LD has reminded employers through the dedicated webpage of the ESLS and other channels that the ESLS will no longer accept applications submitted via the old version of application form (ESLS-1) starting from June 17, 2024.

The LD will continue to keep in view the applications for importation of labour by different industries, and include suitable posts in the List of Common Posts in a timely manner for reference of employers.

(7) The LD will review the ESLS prior to the lapse of its two-year implementation period.

The Government will continue to closely monitor and formulate measures in the light of the supply and demand of manpower, so as to sustain the economic and social development of Hong Kong.