

LCQ15: Recruitment arrangements for short-term jobs for tourism industry

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, in the Legislative Council today (August 18):

Question:

At the end of March, the Government announced that it had accepted a proposal from members of the tourism industry and would spend \$150 million for creating some 2 000 short-term jobs for hiring practitioners of the tourism industry, who would carry out administrative support work at 24 community vaccination centres for a period of five months starting from May 1. The Government entrusted a new company, set up by the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) and a number of other organisations of the industry, to undertake the recruitment work concerned. Some persons who are familiar with the operation of TIC and the tourism industry have pointed out that the company, despite having been allocated \$2 million as administrative fee by the Government, has inappropriately collected a fee from the wage of each recruited person. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) under the circumstances that the TIC has not only kept comprehensive information on the Outbound Tour Escort Directory and the Tourist Guide Directory, but also possessed the relevant recruitment and administrative experience and that the TIC's normal workload has substantially reduced and its outbound levy income has dropped drastically amid the epidemic, why the Government did not entrust the TIC to undertake the aforesaid recruitment work so as to alleviate the TIC's financial difficulties and make good use of its idle manpower;

(2) why the Government directly entrusted the company with the recruitment work without conducting an open tender exercise;

(3) as it is learnt that the persons-in-charge of the company include senior personnel of the TIC as well as owners of travel agents and their relatives, whether the Government had considered the issues of conflict of interest before it entrusted the company with the recruitment work; of the measures put in place to prevent the persons-in-charge of the company from reaping profits through jobbery; and

(4) whether it has given the company permission to collect a fee from the wage of each recruited person; if so, of the reasons for that, and the amount that the company has been permitted to collect; if not, whether it will conduct follow-up investigation, including referring the case to law enforcement agencies for investigation?

Reply:

President,

To relieve the unemployment situation due to the epidemic and the anti-epidemic measures, the Government earmarked \$6.6 billion under the Anti-epidemic Fund in 2020 to create around 30 000 time-limited jobs. In view of the persistent effect of the epidemic on the employment situation and the remarkable result of the first round of the Job Creation Scheme, the Government further earmarked \$6.6 billion in February this year in the 2021-22 Budget to launch the second round of the Job Creation Scheme for creating an additional 30 000 jobs.

The Government understands that people from certain industries have been particularly affected by the epidemic and are facing the situation of underemployment or even unemployment. Hence, departments particularly take into account the situation of these industries when formulating details of the job creation proposals. Employing the practitioners of travel trade to be responsible for the operation and administrative work at community vaccination centres under the second round of the Job Creation Scheme is the arrangement made having regard to the underemployment situation of the travel trade and the proposal put forth by the travel trade. Regarding the questions raised by the Hon Paul Tse on the administrative support scheme by the travel trade for the community vaccination centres, our consolidated reply is set out below.

The COVID-19 epidemic, which has last for over a year, has dealt a heavy blow to the tourism industry. Many practitioners of the travel trade have to face the problems of being laid off or underemployment, which have seriously affected their livelihood. Therefore, when the travel trade proactively put forward a proposal to the Government, the Civil Service Bureau immediately liaised and discussed with the trade to gauge their views and to map out details of the measure to create short-term jobs within a short period of time with a view to addressing the imminent needs of the trade. The representatives of the travel trade putting forward the proposal come from various travel related associations. Apart from the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong, they also include trade associations of the hotel industry and travel trade, tourist guides unions and other associations. The Tourism Industry Service Limited is specially set up for handling the administrative work arising from the administrative support scheme by the travel trade for the community vaccination centres, such as recruitment of staff, signing of employment contract with employees, management and deployment of staff employed, and submission of progress reports to the Government on a regular basis.

Starting from May 1 this year, the Government, through the second round of the Job Creation Scheme under Anti-epidemic Fund, has created around 1 700 short-term jobs for the practitioners in the travel trade to be responsible for the operation and administrative work at 24 community vaccination centres which are not operated by private hospitals. Upon the launch of outreach programmes for COVID-19 vaccination, the practitioners of the travel trade employed under the scheme have also been deployed to take up the relevant administrative work. Eligible applicants include tour guides, tour escorts, staff of travel agents, staff of hotels, coach drivers, etc. Employees for

filling the jobs created under the scheme are selected through open recruitment in order to ensure an open, impartial and fair process. The remuneration of the employees is determined having regard to the positions taken up by them and their actual work hours. The funding for paying the salary for staff will not be used for other purposes and the Government has not approved the Tourism Industry Service Limited to collect any fees from the salary of the employees. Regarding the allegations against the Tourism Industry Service Limited of extracting a certain percentage from the salary of the employees as an income of the company, the Government notes that the company has earlier issued an open letter to all staff to refute such allegations. Besides, the allocation for administrative fee is used for various miscellaneous expenditure, such as recruitment expenses (including rental for temporary recruitment venue) and transportation cost arising from the outreach programmes for COVID-19 vaccination, etc.

The Tourism Industry Service Limited has appointed a qualified independent accounting firm to perform auditing. The Government will release funding only after scrutinising the reports submitted by the company and audited by the accountant. The Government will continue to closely monitor the implementation of the scheme to ensure smooth operation of the community vaccination centres, prudent use of public money, and protection of the rights of the employees.