

LCQ15: Solving the problem of insufficient manpower of lifeguards

Following is a question by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai and a written reply by the Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (May 31):

Question:

According to the information provided by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), it needed to employ more than 600 seasonal lifeguards from April to May this year, but as at the 1st of this month, only 240 lifeguards reported for duty. Some members of the public are worried that some public swimming facilities may not be fully open for members of the public to use during the swimming season, resulting in a waste of public resources. Moreover, in the light of the shortage of lifeguards in Hong Kong, I proposed at the meeting of the Panel on Public Service of this Council on the 15th of this month that the authorities should consider importing lifeguards from the Mainland cities of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has conducted survey on the median wage of lifeguards employed in the private sector in Hong Kong at present, and how such figure compares to the median wage of the LCSD's lifeguards (including seasonal lifeguards and civil service lifeguards);

(2) as some trade unionists have indicated that with the low academic qualification requirements for entry into the lifeguard industry, its attractiveness to talents with high academic qualifications from the GBA Mainland cities is limited, whether the Government has assessed the attractiveness of recruiting qualified persons from the GBA Mainland cities to come to Hong Kong to work as lifeguards with the median wage of lifeguards in Hong Kong; whether it will launch a pilot recruitment scheme to gauge responses to the scheme from the actual application situation;

(3) as some trade unionists have indicated that the Government should recruit more civil service lifeguards to maintain a stable workforce, whether the Government has assessed if it is a proper use of public money to expand the staffing establishment of civil service lifeguards under the circumstances that the work nature of lifeguards is mostly seasonal;

(4) whether it has studied in detail the feasibility of importing lifeguards from the GBA Mainland cities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) as the LCSD indicated earlier on that it would explore the feasibility of the provision of seasonal lifeguard services by outsourced contractors at designated public swimming pools, of the progress of the relevant work, and

whether there is an implementation timetable?

Reply:

President,

There are 45 public swimming pools, 39 gazetted beaches and five water sports centres with life-saving services under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). Apart from senior lifeguards, around 1 300 lifeguards are needed during the non-swimming season (i.e. from November to March of the following year). In the swimming season from April onwards, around 1 800 and 2 000 lifeguards are required during the non-peak months (i.e. from April to May and from September to October) and peak months (i.e. from June to August) respectively. As at May 1 this year, the number of lifeguards employed by the LCSD is close to 1 700, including around 1 400 lifeguards on long-term employment and over 200 contract lifeguards. In view of the number of lifeguards currently recruited (as of May 1), 25 public swimming pools under the LCSD have been fully open for public use; 17 swimming pools are partially open due to manpower problem; and three swimming pools are closed due to conversion/annual maintenance works. The LCSD is still actively recruiting seasonal lifeguards for the year. Appointed contract staff will report for duty in batches. My reply to the questions raised by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai is as follows:

(1) The mid-point of the pay scales and the average monthly salary of lifeguards employed by the LCSD (including civil service lifeguards and contract (full-year or seasonal) lifeguards) are \$20,540 and \$23,800 respectively.

According to the information collected from companies/institutions taking part in the salaries survey of similar jobs conducted by the LCSD in September 2022, the average monthly salary of lifeguards in the private sector is about \$22,500.

(2) and (4) There have been an undersupply of manpower in the overall labour market in Hong Kong in recent years. With the number of new swimming pools in local private development projects, hotels and theme parks increasing rapidly by nearly 200 in the past few years, the demand for lifeguards in the market continues to rise. In addition, swimming is a seasonal activity and the need for lifeguards varies with the swimming season. The job of seasonal lifeguards is also short-term in nature and lacks stability, which have brought tremendous challenges and difficulties in their recruitment.

To stabilise the manpower supply of lifeguards in the department, the LCSD added full-year lifeguard posts on two-year contract in 2023 to increase the stability of the posts and recruited 110 employees successfully. With longer contract period, it is believed that this will stabilise the manpower supply of lifeguards. Furthermore, the LCSD has rolled out a series of measures to increase the overall supply of qualified lifeguards. These include (i) launching the Combined Seasonal Lifeguard Training Scheme to offer full-time training and practice in respect of swimming pool and beach

lifeguards in a "hire and train" mode, so as to help those without life-saving qualifications to acquire pool and/or beach life saving awards before serving as the seasonal lifeguards of the LCSD; (ii) exploring with the Hong Kong Life Saving Society and the Employees Retraining Board to co-organise life-saving training programmes and provide employment services; and (iii) organising life-saving training programmes for ethnic minorities again to provide them with intensive training to become qualified lifeguards within a short period of time, thereby expanding the source of manpower supply in the market.

At present, the LCSD is focusing on the implementation of the above measures and reviewing their effectiveness. It is also actively studying and exploring other measures that help increase the supply of lifeguards, including exploring the feasibility of recruiting people holding relevant qualifications from places other than Hong Kong (including the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area) as lifeguards.

(3) We must strike a balance between maintaining public services and using public funds. We must use public funds effectively while providing quality services to the public as far as possible. Swimming activities have always been popular with the public. As the problem of global warming continues, the public hopes to extend the swimming season. At present, the newly constructed swimming pools of the LCSD are open throughout the year.

In the past five years, the LCSD bid for resources to create more than 260 civil service lifeguard posts and created 110 two-year contract full-year lifeguard posts in 2023 to increase the ratio of civil service lifeguards to seasonal lifeguards of beaches and swimming pools, thereby increasing the stability of lifeguard manpower. The LCSD will deploy the full-year lifeguards additionally employed to swimming pools or beaches open all year round or with longer swimming season to enhance the services of aquatic venues. The arrangement is considered appropriate.

Besides, with a view to maintaining and upgrading the standard of the serving lifeguards, the LCSD provides training to the serving civil service lifeguards during non-swimming season, which includes assisting them to revalidate their life saving qualifications every three years; arranging them to participate in enrichment courses on life-saving skills; and offering training to improve their customer service skills. The full-year lifeguards can also support the above arrangements.

(5) The LCSD is exploring and making the preparations for outsourcing seasonal lifeguard services at designated public swimming pools, including selecting suitable venues, studying the deployment of manpower and seeking resources. The LCSD will then attempt to outsource lifeguard services at its public swimming pools as soon as possible.