

LCQ17: Importation of labour

Following is a question by the Hon Jimmy Ng and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (March 27):

Question:

Since February of last year, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Hong Kong has remained at 2.8 per cent, which is a record low since 1998. Operators of quite a number of industries have relayed that as they have encountered difficulties in staff recruitment, they hope that the Government will relax the criteria for vetting and approval of applications for importation of labour under the Supplementary Labour Scheme (the Scheme). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that from 2015 to 2017, the success rates of applications for labour importation under the Scheme for the (i) transport, storage and communications industries and (ii) financing, insurance, real estate and business services industries were lower than those for other industries, whether the Government has looked into the causes for that; if so, of the outcome; whether it will review the Scheme, with a view to raising the success rates of applications for importation of labour for those industries;

(2) whether it will (i) consider afresh setting industry-specific quotas for labour importation, and (ii) relax the manpower ratio requirement of two full-time local workers to one imported worker under the Scheme; and

(3) as the Chief Executive stated in last year's Policy Address that the Government would consider allowing a greater flexibility for subsidised elderly service and rehabilitation service units to import carers, of the details and progress of the relevant work; whether the Government will examine allowing a greater flexibility also for other industries to import labour; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) and (2) The Government operates different schemes for employers to apply for importation of labour on account of their actual operational circumstances so as to supplement skills not readily available in the local labour market and sustain the competitiveness and development needs of Hong Kong. Depending on the skill levels and/or educational requirements of the job vacancies concerned, employers may apply to the Immigration Department for admission of professionals or to the Labour Department (LD) for importation of workers at technician level or below under the Supplementary Labour Scheme (SLS).

SLS has not prescribed a quota ceiling of imported workers for the labour market as a whole or for individual sectors. Each application is considered on its actual merits, such as whether the employer has a genuine need for importation of labour, the number of local employees, and the employer's business and financial situation. Besides, in vetting applications, except for specific posts such as farm workers, LD normally requires a specific manning ratio, e.g., employers shall employ two full-time local workers for bringing in one imported worker from other places (i.e. 2:1), with a view to safeguarding the employment opportunities of local workers. The Government at this stage has no plan to adjust the above manning ratio.

(3) Relevant government bureaux and departments will closely monitor the manpower supply and demand of different sectors, as well as enhance training and attract new recruits. The Government appreciates that the elderly care service sector has manpower shortage problems. The Chief Executive's 2017 Policy Address announced that, on the premise of safeguarding local workers' priority for employment, consideration might be given to allowing greater flexibility for subsidised elderly service and rehabilitation service units to import carers. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) conducted a survey on subsidised elderly and rehabilitation service units in 2017 to understand the manpower situation of frontline care staff. The results of the survey showed that the vacancy rate of the relevant posts reached 18 per cent.

To help the sector recruit and retain frontline care staff, the Government has since 2018 allocated additional resources to subvented welfare service units to enhance the remuneration of frontline care staff. In this connection, LD staged a "Job Expo for Elderly and Rehabilitation Services" in July 2018 to help social welfare organisations recruit the staff required. SWD is currently conducting another survey on subsidised elderly and rehabilitation service units to gauge if additional resources to increase the remuneration for these organisations have changed the manpower situation of frontline care staff. The relevant data analysis is expected to be completed by mid-2019. The Government will study the relevant statistics in planning the way forward.