

LCQ19: Improving the Government's human resources planning

Following is a question by the Hon Mrs Regina Ip and a written reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mrs Ingrid Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (February 26):

Question:

It is learnt that the number of posts in the civil service establishment dropped from around 193 000 as at March 31, 2022 to 191 742 as at September 30 last year, while the civil service strength fell from around 176 000 to 172 499. On the other hand, there are views that the Government may further enhance its administrative efficiency by making good use of innovative technology and improving the existing human resources planning. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Government will review the existing establishment structure and integrate posts with similar or overlapping functions as appropriate; if so, of the details and the implementation timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that as indicated on November 20 last year in its reply to a question raised by a Member of this Council, the Government had started to provide a generative AI document processing copilot application (the AI application) developed by the Hong Kong Generative AI Research and Development Center for internal trial use by government staff to perform document processing work like drafting, translation and summarisation of documents, of the following information regarding the AI application: (i) the government departments using the AI application on a trial basis, (ii) the percentage of government documents drafted with the assistance of the AI application out of the total number of government documents and (iii) the Government's savings in time and manpower costs after using the AI application;

(3) whether the Government will further utilise the AI application to handle more routine document processing work so as to further release manpower; if so, of the details and the implementation timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) whether the Government has currently formulated policies and measures to streamline the government structure and enhance administrative efficiency; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) whether the Government will consider setting up a high-level steering committee to assist itself in reviewing on a regular basis the establishment and functions of various government departments, as well as the application of various innovative technologies in government departments, and to make recommendations on the addition or deletion of posts within the

establishment; if so, of the details and the implementation timetable; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Regarding the question raised by Hon Mrs Regina IP, we have consulted the Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau, and our consolidated reply is as follows:

(1), (4) & (5) The Civil Service Bureau (CSB) has been committed to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service, encouraging various policy bureaux/departments (B/Ds) to regularly review and appropriately deploy their manpower to effectively implement government policies and initiatives.

To strictly control the civil service establishment and ensure the sustainability of public finances, the Government has implemented the zero-growth policy in the overall civil service establishment since 2021-22. B/Ds have improved their work efficiency through re-organisation of work and internal redeployment, etc. It is anticipated that by March 31, 2025, the civil service establishment will have reduced, on a cumulative basis, by approximately 2 000 posts from the level as at end-March 2021.

The adjustment of the civil service establishment must adhere to the two principles of stability and sustainable development, balancing the manpower requirements of B/Ds to effectively provide existing and new services and the need to streamline the civil service. The current term Government will continue to strictly control the growth of the civil service establishment and optimise the use of manpower resources through the application of technology, for serving the society and citizens with dedication.

We have all along been mindful of the functions of different grades and ranks as to whether they are very similar or largely overlap, and will make adjustments or consolidation accordingly. We are also mindful of the need to update and adjust the functions of certain grades due to technology advancement. For instance, the demand for typing services has significantly dropped following the prevalence of the use of computers. As a result, the Government stopped the recruitment of Typists more than two decades ago and gradually re-appointed the serving Typists as Clerical Assistants through the In-service Appointment Scheme (IAS) and the provision of appropriate training. Apart from the continued delivery of clerical services, those Clerical Assistants re-appointed from Typists also provide frontline customer services and carry out various supporting work at B/Ds. After multiple rounds of IAS and through natural wastage, the number of Typists, which once exceeded 3 000 at its peak, has been successfully reduced to some 120 at the end of last year. The functions of the Typists now remaining have also been adjusted. In addition to handling Chinese and English clerical work through the use of word-processing softwares, they perform data entry or other clerical duties in law enforcement departments or departments which process large amounts of personal data (e.g. Inland Revenue Department).

Individual civil service grades whose future manpower needs are uncertain, such as those with surplus staff or those undergoing institutional reviews, are classified as "Controlled Grades" by the CSB. These grades require the CSB's approval before open recruitment, which is not lightly granted unless they have clear prospect for development and the demand for manpower is obvious and certain. Under these "controlled" circumstances, B/Ds must seek alternative solutions to handle the responsibilities of these grades, including integrating the duties of the "Controlled Grades" with other grades.

The above-mentioned work has been carried out by the Government on a long-term basis without a fixed timeline.

The operation of B/Ds and the work of civil servants must keep pace with the times. The Supplement to the Chief Executive's 2024 Policy Address has set out the initiative of promoting the adoption of management measures and digitalisation among B/Ds to reprioritise and re-organise their work, capitalise on technology solutions, and streamline work processes, with a view to optimising the use of the civil service manpower resources. With assistance from the Digital Policy Office (DPO), the CSB will drive these initiatives among B/Ds in 2025, with a view to deploying human resources more appropriately and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service. The DPO will continue to lead various B/Ds in applying innovative technologies and accelerating the development of digital government. The DPO will also actively support the above-mentioned measures of promoting digitalisation for optimising the use of civil service manpower resources, thereby enhancing government efficiency and services.

(2) & (3) The Government has started the pilot use of a generative artificial intelligence document processing copilot application (the Application) developed by the Hong Kong Generative AI Research and Development Center (HKGAI) under InnoHK since mid-2024 to assist government officers in handling document processing tasks such as drafting, translation, and summarisation of documents. The DPO has invited all B/Ds to arrange their officers of different grades to participate in this pilot use exercise.

The Application is currently at the development stage. The purpose of conducting the pilot use exercise is to collect the government officers' feedback on using the Application according to their operational needs, thus facilitating HKGAI in further training and optimising its large language model and the Application. The DPO does not, at the current stage, maintain information on the percentage of documents processed in the pilot use against all the government documents, as well as the time and manpower costs saved. In the longer term, the Application will help reduce the manpower required for government officers to handle general document processing tasks, allowing manpower to be deployed to other areas of need, thereby creating maximum value.

The DPO will continue to co-ordinate with various B/Ds to extend the pilot use of the Application to more government officers in handling the tasks of drafting, translation, and summarisation of documents, and through the collection of user feedback, to assist HKGAI in optimising the

Application's performance in handling document processing work.