

## LCQ21: Addressing the problem of manpower shortage

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 (February 26):

Question:

In the report on the 2023 Manpower Projection published by the Government in November last year, it was projected that the manpower shortage in Hong Kong would be widened to 180 000 by 2028. In particular, skilled technical workers, manual labourers and service industry workers would experience manpower shortage. It was projected that there would be a shortage of 147 000 to 162 000 workers in total by then. Some members of the industrial and commercial sectors are worried that the problem of manpower shortage will limit the development of relevant sectors, and they have urged the Government to introduce more targeted measures to address the problem. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective numbers of quotas used under the various sector-specific labour importation schemes so far; whether the authorities will study increasing the quotas for such schemes to address the problem of manpower shortage, as well as expanding the relevant schemes to cover more sectors with manpower shortage; if so, of the details;
- (2) as the Government launched the Enhanced Supplementary Labour Scheme (ESLS) in September 2023 under which the general exclusion of the 26 job categories as well as unskilled or low-skilled posts from labour importation would be suspended for two years, of the number of labour importation applications approved under the ESLS so far and the number of workers involved, together with a breakdown by 26 job categories; whether the authorities will extend the ESLS or even regularise it; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) as it is learnt that applications under the ESLS and sector-specific labour importation schemes are in general required to be subject to a manning ratio of imported labour to full-time local staff (i.e. 1:2), but such a requirement may be waived under special circumstances, whether the authorities have waived the manning ratio requirement in respect of individual applications under such schemes in the past; if so, of the details; whether consideration will be given to relaxing the manning ratio requirement of such schemes; if so, of the details;
- (4) whether consideration will be given to relaxing the requirement that wages of workers imported under the ESLS and sector-specific labour importation schemes should not be lower than the prevailing median monthly wage of a comparable position in the market; if so, of the details;

(5) as employers participating in the ESLS and sector-specific labour importation schemes are currently allowed to deduct up to 10 per cent of the wages of imported workers as the accommodation fee for the period that the imported workers occupy the accommodation provided by their employers, whether the authorities will consider raising the percentage; if so, of the details; and

(6) whether it will introduce more new measures to address the problem of manpower shortage in the future; if so, of the details?

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 Residential Care Homes (Care Workers Scheme) for the residential care home (RCH) sector. 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.

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

(1) Since the launch of the Care Workers Scheme and sector-specific labour importation schemes, a total of around 23 800 quotas for importation of workers were approved as at January 31, 2025. A breakdown by labour importation schemes is as follows:

Labour Importation Scheme	Quota ceiling	Quotas approved
Care Workers Scheme	15 000	Around 7 200 (Note 1)
Labour Importation Scheme for the Construction Sector (Construction Sector Scheme)	12 000	9 109 (Note 2)
Labour Importation Scheme for the Aviation Sector (Aviation Sector Scheme)	6 300	5 823

Labour Importation Scheme for the Transport Sector – Public Light Bus (PLB)/ Coach Trade (Transport Sector Scheme)	1 700 (PLB: 900 Coach trade: 800)	1 700
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Note 1: Including the new quotas approved since the implementation of the Scheme in June 2023 and the quotas for renewal in respect of care workers previously imported through SLS.

Note 2: Quota allocation is on a rolling basis, i.e. quotas will be released for new application after the completion of the relevant construction projects. As of end-2024, there were a total of 9 109 approved and active quotas under the Scheme.

For the Care Workers Scheme, the Government reviewed the manpower situation of care workers in the RCH sector and in July 2024 announced that it would provide additional 8 000 quotas in the coming three years. Having regard to the overall demand for and supply of care workers in the RCH sector, the Secretary for Labour and Welfare will make timely adjustments to the number of overall quotas, as well as the number and pace of quotas allotted in each batch, with a view to responding flexibly and swiftly to changes in the manpower supply and demand in the RCH sector. Regarding the Construction Sector Scheme, on the premise of ensuring priority for local workers' employment, the DEVB will carefully consider the allotment of the remaining quotas based on the labour market condition and construction project needs, and take note of the updates on manpower forecast to continuously monitor the use of quotas. In respect of the Aviation Sector Scheme, the TLB will make reference to a number of relevant factors such as the results of the latest airport manpower survey conducted by the Airport Authority Hong Kong, the implementation of the Scheme, stakeholders' views, etc. to decide the future direction of the Scheme. Besides, TLB and the Transport Department are reviewing the implementation of the Transport Sector Scheme and assessing the manpower demand of the sector in the coming few years. We shall announce the way forward of the Schemes in good time subject to the review results.

(2) From September 4, 2023 to January 31, 2025, 6 762 applications involving 47 474 quotas of imported workers were approved under ESLS. A breakdown of the number of quotas of imported workers approved by the 26 job categories, unskilled/ low-skilled posts and other posts is at Annex.

The LD has been closely monitoring the implementation of ESLS and has commenced the review of ESLS. The LD will fully consider the views of stakeholders including employer associations and labour organisations in mapping out the way forward.

(3) According to the general requirements of the sector-specific labour importation schemes and ESLS, employers shall fulfill a manning ratio of 2:1 for full-time local employees to imported workers. Under the Construction Sector Scheme, individual applications with special circumstances, such as applications involving special trades/ disciplines with very limited local

supply (e.g. overhead linesman (high voltage)), will be exempted. For ESLS, exceptions include farm workers for which the standard of manpower requirement is specified by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. On the Care Workers Scheme, subvented RCHs and contract RCHs may for every two full-time local employees apply to import a maximum of one care worker only (i.e. a 2:1 ratio), and private RCHs and self-financing RCHs may for every full-time local employee apply to import a maximum of one care worker only (i.e. a 1:1 ratio). The Government has no plan to further relax relevant requirements.

(4) to (6) To safeguard employment priority for local workers, applicant employers of respective labour importation schemes must undertake local open recruitment and give priority to employing suitable local workers to fill the vacancies at a salary not lower than the prevailing median monthly wage of a comparable position in the market. At the same time, employers approved to import workers are required to sign a Standard Employment Contract (SEC) with imported workers, and shall pay a salary not lower than the median monthly wage of a comparable position. Besides, in accordance with SEC, the employer may deduct the actual cost of accommodation in respect of a period that an imported worker occupies the accommodation from the wages payable to the worker for the corresponding period or 10 per cent of the amount of wages (excluding any overtime pay) payable to the worker for the corresponding period, whichever is the less.

As explained in items (1) and (2) of the reply, the Government has been closely monitoring and reviewing the implementation of labour importation schemes. Relevant bureaux have been implementing appropriate measures in light of the situation to enhance the arrangement and operation of the Schemes. The LD has also commenced the review of ESLS. In addition, the Government will continue to adopt a multi-pronged strategy, including promoting training and retraining, providing appropriate employment support and driving technology adoption for productivity uplifting, to address the manpower shortage problem.

The Government is also exploring the introduction of a new channel under the General Employment Policy and the Admission Scheme for Mainland Talents and Professionals to attract a specified number of young non-degree talents possessing relevant professional technical skills and experience to apply for entry into Hong Kong to join the skilled trades facing acute manpower shortage.