

立法會
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Establishment Subcommittee of the Finance Committee

Minutes of the 2nd meeting
held in Conference Room 1 of Legislative Council Complex
on Wednesday, 25 November, 2020 at 9:30 am

Members present:

Hon YIU Si-wing, BBS (Deputy Chairman)
Hon WONG Ting-kwong, GBS, JP
Hon Starry LEE Wai-king, SBS, JP
Hon CHAN Hak-kan, BBS, JP
Hon Steven HO Chun-yin, BBS
Hon Alice MAK Mei-kuen, BBS, JP
Hon KWOK Wai-keung, JP
Hon Christopher CHEUNG Wah-fung, SBS, JP
Hon Elizabeth QUAT, BBS, JP
Hon POON Siu-ping, BBS, MH
Dr Hon CHIANG Lai-wan, SBS, JP
Ir Dr Hon LO Wai-kwok, SBS, MH, JP
Hon CHUNG Kwok-pan
Hon Jimmy NG Wing-ka, BBS, JP
Dr Hon Junius HO Kwan-yiu, JP
Hon Holden CHOW Ho-ding
Hon SHIU Ka-fai, JP
Hon Wilson OR Chong-shing, MH
Hon YUNG Hoi-yan, JP
Dr Hon Pierre CHAN
Hon CHAN Chun-ying, JP
Hon LUK Chung-hung, JP
Hon Tony TSE Wai-chuen, BBS

Members absent:

Hon Mrs Regina IP LAU Suk-ye, GBS, JP (Chairman)
Hon WONG Kwok-kin, SBS, JP
Hon Martin LIAO Cheung-kong, GBS, JP

Public Officers attending:

Mr Raistlin LAU Chun	Deputy Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury (Treasury) 1
Mrs Angelina CHEUNG FUNG Wing-ping	Deputy Secretary for the Civil Service 1
Mr Chris FUNG Pan-chung	Principal Assistant Secretary for Food and Health (Health) 3
Miss Iris MA Mei-wah	Principal Executive Officer (Health) Food and Health Bureau
Mr Leo LI Ngo-chuen	Principal Assistant Secretary for the Civil Service (Pay and Leave)
Dr SO Ping-man, JP	Deputy Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation
Dr Thomas SIT Hon-chung	Assistant Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (Inspection and Quarantine)
Dr Ronald LAM Man-kin, JP	Deputy Director of Health
Miss Winky WONG Wai-man, JP	Assistant Director of Health (Administration and Policy)
Dr JONG Kwok-kwan	Head, Public Health Laboratory Services Branch, Department of Health

Clerk in attendance:

Ms Connie SZETO	Chief Council Secretary (1)4
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Staff in attendance:

Miss Judy YEE	Council Secretary (1)4
Ms Alice CHEUNG	Senior Legislative Assistant (1)1
Ms Sharon CHAN	Legislative Assistant (1)4

Action

The Deputy Chairman drew members' attention to the information paper ECI(2020-21)7, which set out the latest changes in the directorate establishment approved since 2002 and the changes to the directorate establishment in relation to the one item on the agenda. He then reminded members that in accordance with Rule 83A of the Rules of Procedure ("RoP"), they should disclose the nature of any direct or indirect pecuniary interest relating to the item under discussion at the meeting before they spoke on the item. He also drew members' attention to RoP 84 on voting in case of direct pecuniary interest.

EC(2020-21)7 Proposed grade structure review for the Veterinary Laboratory Technician and Medical Laboratory Technician grades of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and the Department of Health respectively with effect from the first day of the month immediately following the month of approval by Finance Committee or 1 June 2021, whichever is later, to tackle the recruitment and retention difficulties in both grades

2. The Deputy Chairman remarked that the staffing proposal was to conduct a grade structure review ("GSR") for the Veterinary Laboratory Technician ("VLT") and Medical Laboratory Technician ("MLT") grades of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") and the Department of Health ("DH") respectively with effect from the first day of the month immediately following the month of approval by Finance Committee ("FC") or 1 June 2021, whichever is later, to tackle the recruitment and retention difficulties in both grades.

3. At the invitation of the Deputy Chairman, Mr KWOK Wai-keung, Chairman of the Panel on Public Service, remarked that members of the Panel were consulted on this staffing proposal at the Panel meeting held on 4 November 2019. At the meeting, members discussed the findings and recommendations of the GSR for the VLT and MLT grades of AFCD and DH as conducted by the Standing Commission on Civil Service Salaries and Conditions of Services ("the Commission"). Members supported the relevant findings and recommendations in principle.

Action

4. Mr KWOK Wai-keung pointed out that at the Panel meeting, some members had expressed concerns on the prolonged manpower shortage of the VLT grade and enquired about the measures in place to attract talents, such as recruiting candidates from overseas. The Administration responded that the proposed increase in the starting pay of the relevant grade would help attract more talents to join the grade, while candidates with non-local qualifications could also apply for the relevant positions. In addition, the Administration informed members on 23 September 2020 that having accepted the Commission's recommendations and with regard to the concerns of the staff side of relevant grades, the Chief Executive in Council would make an exceptional "grandfathering" arrangement for serving VLT Is/VLT IIs and MLT Is/MLT IIs, such that as and when they are promoted to the VT and MT ranks respectively, they would be remunerated at MPS Point 29. The Administration indicated that it would seek the approval of the Establishment Subcommittee and FC for the relevant proposal and arrangements with a view to resolving the difficulties in the recruitment and retention of manpower in both grades in an expeditious manner.

Declaration of interests

5. Mr Tony TSE declared his membership of the Commission from 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2019, during which he had participated in the Commission's work on the GSR for the VLT and MLT grades of AFCD and DH, including the formulation of recommendations in the relevant report. Mr TSE said that he would refrain from voting on this staffing proposal. Mr CHAN Chun-ying remarked that he is currently a member of the Commission but he had not participated in the Commission's discussion on this staffing proposal.

Deliberation

Improvement on the remuneration packages of the Veterinary Laboratory Technician and Medical Laboratory Technician grades

6. Mr Steven HO expressed support for this staffing proposal. He enquired about the number of employees involved in AFHD's proposed deletion of the VLT I and VLT II ranks. He opined that as compared to the remuneration offered by private institutions to employees at similar ranks, the staff members of the aforesaid two ranks were remunerated at a lower level, leading to difficulties in recruitment. He asked how this staffing proposal could improve the remuneration and promotion prospects of VLTs and address the difficulties in recruitment.

Action

7. Mr SHIU Ka-fai noted the difficulties of the Administration in recruiting VLTs. For instance, the average vacancy rate of the VLT grade in 2017, 2018 and 2019 stood high at 26%. He opined that the recruitment difficulties were attributable to the low remuneration of the VLT rank. He asked how this staffing proposal could change the remuneration of the serving VLT IIs and the number of newly created post of Associate Veterinary Technologists ("AVT") AFCD planned to recruit.

8. In response, Deputy Director of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("DD/AFCD") said that due to the manpower shortage at the VLT I and VLT II ranks, the Administration proposed to merge these two ranks to form a new AVT rank in order to improve the remuneration and promotion prospects with a view to retaining talents and addressing the difficulties in recruitment. He pointed out that as at 30 June 2020, the establishment of the VLT I rank was 13, whereas its actual strength was only 10. The establishment of the VLT II rank was 25, while its actual strength stood at 18. Subsequent to the formation of the new AVT rank by merging the aforesaid two ranks, the new rank would become the entry rank of the VLT grade, with a starting pay point and a maximum pay point at MPS 14 and 24 respectively, which were higher than the starting and maximum pay points at MPS 8 and 21 of the current entry rank (i.e. VLT II). For serving VLT Is and VLT IIs, their pay would be converted to the new pay scale through normal conversion arrangements or special conversion arrangements. Details of the relevant arrangements were set out in Enclosure 3 of the Administration's paper.

9. Mr POON Siu-ping said that he supported this staffing proposal in principle. He enquired about the supply of VLTs in the local market and whether the Administration had plans to improve other conditions of the remunerations (e.g. fringe benefits) in addition to the proposed pay rise for VLTs.

10. DD/AFCD responded that at present, both VLT I and VLT II ranks belonged to Diploma Grades, whose entry requirements were similar to those of the MLT I and MLT II ranks of DH as well as similar positions in the private market. During recruitment, AFCD often faced competitions from the aforesaid organizations. Being remunerated at a low level aside, officers in the VLT grade mostly worked at relatively more remote locations (i.e. the Tai Lung Veterinary Laboratory and the Sheung Shui Slaughter House ("SSSH"), which also had a bearing on recruitment. In this regard, AFCD had made corresponding arrangements such as provision of special traffic arrangements during typhoons and improving the working conditions of SSSH, etc. to make working at the grade more attractive. AFCD was also studying measures to improve compensations for overtime work.

Action

11. Ir Dr LO Wai-kwok said that he supported this staffing proposal in principle. He noted the serious manpower shortage in the VLT grade from Enclosure 1 of the Administration paper and opined that it was necessary to create a new entry rank as well as adjusting the pay scale to address the difficulties in recruitment. In comparison, the manpower shortage in the MLT grade was not serious, the establishment of which required 261 officers while its actual strength had reached 262. Besides, the average resignation rate of the MLT grade from 2014-2015 to 2018-2019 stood at 1.81%, which was lower than the figure in the private market. Ir Dr LO asked why the Administration proposed to change the grade structure and pay scale of the MLT grade.

12. In response, Deputy Director of Health ("DD(H)") remarked that while there was no manpower shortage in the MLT grade at present, it would take a long time for MLT IIs to get promoted to the next higher rank, thus, improvements had to be made for retaining talents. He pointed out that the rank of MLT II had an establishment of 103 posts, while that of the MLT I had just 44 posts. It would take around 21 years on average for an MLT II to get promoted to the MLT I rank. Furthermore, he pointed out that the average resignation rate of the MLT grade from 2014-2015 to 2018-2019 stood at 1.81%, which was higher than 0.69% for the entire civil service during the same period. After discussing with MLT grade officers and the Civil Service Bureau, DH considered it necessary to improve the remuneration and promotion prospect of the rank for the purpose of retaining talents, and therefore proposed to merge the MLT I and MLT II ranks to form a new entry rank of Associate Medical Technologist ("AMT") to enhance the remuneration package.

Manpower supply and demand of the Veterinary Laboratory Technician and Medical Laboratory Technician grades

13. Mr POON Siu-ping expressed concern on the adequacy of the training available for the VLT and MLT grades for the purposes of addressing the relevant manpower demand. He enquired about the annual number of graduates from tertiary institutions meeting the entry requirements of VLT I and II as well as MLT I and II.

14. Mr Holden CHOW expressed support for this staffing proposal so as to address the difficulties in the recruitment and retain talents in the VLT and MLT grades. He asked about the profile of graduates from tertiary institutions choosing to join the Government in the relevant grades, and the profile of such graduates absorbed by the private market every year.

Action

15. The Deputy Chairman enquired about the respective numbers of persons applied for and appointed to the VLT grade in recent years.

16. In response, DD(H) and DD/AFCD remarked that the entry requirements for the MLT and VLT positions were similar. For MLTs, applicants should hold a Diploma in Medical Laboratory Science ("MLS") from an institute recognized by the Medical Laboratory Technologists Board ("MLTB") of Hong Kong, or equivalent; have registered in Hong Kong as a Medical Laboratory Technologist in Part II of the Register of Medical Laboratory Technologists under the Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance (Cap. 359); and have a valid Practising Certificate issued by the MLTB of Hong Kong. The entry requirements for VLTs mainly included holding a Diploma in MLS of the Hong Kong Polytechnic/Polytechnic University or equivalent; and being registered under Part II of the Register of MLTB of Hong Kong.

17. Regarding the nurturing of talents in tertiary institutions, DD(H) responded that as at end of October 2020, there were a total of 3 932 registered Medical Laboratory Technologists in Hong Kong. The average number of persons graduated from relevant faculties and registered as Medical Laboratory Technologists was around 150 each year. At present, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the School of Medical and Health Sciences of Tung Wah College both offered relevant Bachelor programmes, and the numbers of graduates of the two institutions in 2020 were 47 and 16 respectively. In addition, the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the University of Hong Kong offered a Higher Certificate in MLS biennially, with about 100 graduates from each cohort. Regarding graduates joining the Government or publicly-funded organizations, placements were available at the Public Health Laboratory Services Branch, Clinical Genetic Service Centres and Forensic Pathology Service of DH, AFCD, as well as the Hospital Authority ("HA"). From 2014 to 2019, DH had employed 58 graduates in total.

18. DD/AFCD remarked that from 2014 to 2019, recruitment exercise for officers in the VLT ranks had been conducted by AFCD on a yearly basis. Only one of the eight vacancies was filled in 2014; seven to 12 vacancies were available from 2015 to 2019, and one appointment was made in each year on average. 12 vacancies were available in 2019, but no appointment was made. After review, AFCD opined that recruitment results were dissatisfactory mainly because the entry pay point of the VLT grade was lower than that of the relevant grade in HA, and the promotion prospect of VLTs also compared unfavourably with that of the MLT grade.

19. Mr KWOK Wai-keung opined that the difficulties of recruitment in the VLT and MLT grades were attributable to an inadequate supply of

Action

talents. He enquired whether the Administration had discussed with the tertiary institutions which offered relevant programmes and secondary schools on how to nurture more talents for the two grades.

20. Principal Assistant Secretary for Food and Health (Health) 3 pointed out that the number of places for relevant programmes funded by the University Grants Committee ("UGC") currently provided by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University had increased by 70% from 32 to 54 from 2011-2012 to 2020-2021. In order to monitor the manpower situation of the healthcare professionals on a continual basis, the Administration had been conducting manpower planning and projections for healthcare professionals every three years in step with the triennial planning cycle of UGC. The Food and Health Bureau ("FHB") would conduct a review on the manpower situation of 13 healthcare professions (which were subject to statutory regulation including the MLT grade) by end of 2020 or early 2021, and it would discuss with UGC and the Education Bureau ("EDB") on the need for an increased number of such places.

21. Mr WONG Ting-kwong expressed support for this staffing proposal in principle. He pointed out that the wastage rates of the two grades in question were not high, but both grades were facing enormous difficulties in recruitment. Given the persistent manpower shortage of the two grades (VLT in particular) and the time needed for relevant talents to be nurtured, he asked if the Administration had discussed with EDB on plans to enhance support for training relevant talents, and whether consideration would be given to relaxing the entry requirements of the two grades in question.

22. The Deputy Chairman also enquired whether consideration would be given to relaxing the requirements for the registration and employment of non-locally trained VLTs in Hong Kong with a view to alleviating the manpower shortage of the grade in question.

23. DD/AFCD remarked that as far as the VLT grade was concerned, there was no record of manpower wastage in 2014-2015, but a manpower wastage of 8% was recorded in 2015-2016 to 2018-2019. The wastage rate of the grade for the above-mentioned five years period was 2.2% on average, which was higher than the overall wastage rate of the civil service of the same period (i.e. 0.69%).

24. In response to issues relating to the training of talents, Principal Assistant Secretary for Food and Health (Health) 3 remarked that according to the findings of the Report of the Strategic Review on Healthcare Manpower Planning and Professional Development released in 2017, it was projected that there would be a slight shortage (but close to equilibrium) of MLTs in the short to medium term but it was not an acute problem of

Action

manpower shortage. Furthermore, manpower planning and projections for healthcare professionals were carried out every three years to monitor the manpower situation of the healthcare professionals on a continual basis. Under the existing mechanism, the Medical Laboratory Technician Board was responsible for vetting applications for registration of non-locally trained MLTs.

25. The Deputy Chairman asked whether DH had increased the manpower of MLTs in response to the escalating workload in laboratory tests arising from coronavirus disease 2019 ("COVID-19").

26. DD(H) said that 10 additional MLTs had been employed by the Department on contract terms in response to the escalating workload in laboratory tests, and it was expected that another six would be employed to bring the total number of additional staff to 16. He added that, in addition to manpower, factors affecting how the Government conduct laboratory tests included the capacity of the Government Laboratory and availability of apparatus and equipment. Some private laboratories with good track record had been commissioned by the Department to help with the conduct of laboratory tests.

Financial Implication of the Grade Structure Review

27. Mr KWOK Wai-keung asked if approval was given to this staffing proposal, whether adjustments to the remunerations of mid-level and senior-level staff of the MLT grade would be made accordingly in addition to the adjustments to be made to the remunerations and ranks of MLT I and MLT II. He expressed concern on the impact of the proposal from the perspective of public finance.

28. In response, DD(H) remarked that this proposal would have no bearing on the remuneration package for Chief Medical Technologist and Senior Medical Technologist. Meanwhile, an additional expenditure amounting to \$6.84 million per annum would be incurred for provision of an additional pay point (Master Pay Scale Point 33A) for Medical Technologist and for merging the MLT II and MLT I ranks to form a new AMT rank.

Duties of the Veterinary Laboratory Technician Grade

29. In response to the enquiry made by Mr SHIU Ka-fai regarding the main duties of VLT I and VLT II, Assistant Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation (Inspection and Quarantine) ("AD/AFCD(IQ)) remarked that they were mainly responsible for conducting laboratory testing on zoonotic diseases (such as African Swine Fever, Foot-and-Mouth

Action

Disease and equine infectious diseases), zoonoses (such as avian influenza, rabies and pet infections of COVID-19) and on matters relating to food safety in relation to animals (such as the use of prohibited asthma medicines, prohibited antibiotic and drug-resistant bacteria on animals).

30. Ms Starry LEE expressed support for this staffing proposal in principle in order to alleviate the difficulties in recruiting staff for the VLT grade. Taking into account the duties of the personnel working in the veterinary laboratory, she was of the view that the name of the laboratory had not reflected its duties, and suggested that consideration should be given to renaming the laboratory. She further suggested that the Administration should step up its efforts in promoting a policy for integration of pets and humans.

31. In response, AD/AFCD(IQ) remarked that the English term "veterinary laboratory" was widely in use in different countries of the world, and the term "獸醫化驗室" had been used as the Chinese translation for the veterinary laboratory under AFCD since decades ago. He added that in the past, the laboratory was mainly responsible for helping local farmers in diagnosing illnesses of and providing treatment for animals kept by the farmers. In recent years, the duties of the laboratory had been extended to include studies on avian influenza, the use of antibiotic on animals and the use of prohibited drugs on food animals. On promotion of keeping animals health, AFCD would issue official Animal Health Certificates and official veterinary certificates to ensure that export of live animals and products would meet the veterinary health requirements imposed by importing countries/places, including passing the laboratory test of the government veterinary laboratory, and provision of rabies vaccination to ensure that local animals (particularly pet dogs and pet cats) were vaccinated against rabies. He noted Ms Starry LEE's views on a policy for integration of pets and humans, and added that AFCD had already introduced a number of relevant measures to enhance the well-being of animals.

Remuneration package of civil servants at junior ranks

32. Mr SHIU Ka-fai asked whether consideration would be given to improving the remuneration of civil servants at the lower end of the Training Pay Scale (such as those at point 4 to point 6).

33. Mr Holden CHOW expressed similar views. He suggested that consideration should be given to improving the remuneration package for other junior civil servants at the entry ranks (such as Dead Removal Team of the FHB) in appreciation of their contribution.

Action

34. DD/AFCD noted Members' views. He pointed out that student ranks were introduced in the past to address the problems faced in the recruitment of civil servants at the professional or technical ranks. Appointees to the student ranks had a lower starting salary as they were appointed on the basis that they had not yet fully satisfied the professional or technical requirements of the rank in question, but they could obtain the qualifications through on-the-job training. However, some tertiary institutions had been offering relevant programmes in recent years to nurture talents for such professional or technical ranks. As such, it was believed that such student ranks could be abolished.

Voting on the item

35. There being no further questions from members, the Deputy Chairman put the item to vote. All the members present and voting were in favour of this proposal. The Deputy Chairman declared that the Subcommittee agreed to recommend the item to FC for approval.

36. No member requested that the item be voted on separately at the relevant FC meeting.

37. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 10:25 am.