

For information

**Legislative Council Panel on Public Service
Use of Agency Workers**

Purpose

This paper reports to members on the latest situation concerning the use of agency workers by the Government, and explains the position of the matters of concerns previously raised by members and the corresponding measures taken by the Government.

Background

2. Agency workers in general refer to the manpower supplied by employment agencies under service contracts with Bureaux/Departments (B/Ds). They provide temporary manpower which can be sourced readily by B/Ds to meet their urgent, ad hoc or temporary operational and service needs. Service contracts sourced from agencies enable B/Ds to flexibly arrange temporary manpower and avoid having to redeploy their existing civil servants for the work at the expense of the quality of their public services.

3. Agency workers are under the direct supervision of the B/Ds procuring the service. However, they do not have a contractual employment relationship with the B/Ds concerned. The procurement of agency worker service is governed by the relevant Stores and Procurement Regulations and Financial Circulars. It is subject to the Government's long-standing established procurement principles, including value for money, transparency, open and fair competition and accountability.

4. The Civil Service Bureau (CSB) issued a set of guidelines on the proper use of agency workers in April 2010¹. Under the guidelines, B/Ds may only use agency workers in one or more of the following situations –

- (a) to meet urgent or unforeseen operational and service needs, or unexpected surge in operational and service demands for the short-term;
- (b) to fill short-term manpower gap;
- (c) to meet operational and service needs which entail irregular work patterns or where the nature of the work involved renders it difficult to recruit and retain staff; or
- (d) to provide short-term manpower to deliver services the mode of which will be changed shortly.

As a general guideline, except for the situation at (c) above, these short-term operational and service demands should not last for more than nine months.

5. To strengthen control on the use of agency workers, CSB issued a set of supplementary guidelines to B/Ds in April 2011 on the renewal or re-letting of service contracts for the supply of agency workers, and the requirement of Statutory Minimum Wage (SMW).

Position of Agency Workers as at 30 September 2020

6. To monitor the situation on the use of agency workers by B/Ds more effectively, CSB collects relevant data from B/Ds annually. According to the latest data, there were 1 216 agency workers working in B/Ds as at 30 September 2020. Compared with the peak of 2 398 as at 30 September 2009, there had been a reduction of about 1 180 or 49% agency workers. The number of agency workers was also reduced by about 400 or 25% over the

¹ For the purpose of CSB's guidelines, agency workers do not include information technology manpower supplied by technical service providers under a term contract centrally administered by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (commonly known as "T-contract staff"), service bureau staff providing public library service in the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, body-shopped personnel used by the Housing Department, and manpower supplied through outsourcing services procured by individual B/Ds.

same period in 2019. In the past year, some B/Ds had to use more agency workers to meet unexpected surge in operational and service demands for the short-term. For example, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) used about 60 agency workers to assist in the allowance programmes newly introduced under the Community Care Fund (CCF) for the low-income persons; and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department used about 50 agency workers to assist in processing the applications for various subsidy schemes under the Anti-epidemic Fund. At the same time, since certain B/Ds had reduced the use of agency workers upon completion of some time-limited or one-off tasks (for example, Caring and Sharing Scheme and 2019 District Council Election), the total number of agency workers as at 30 September 2020 as a whole was reduced as compared with the same period in 2019. A breakdown of the distribution of agency workers by B/Ds is at **Annex A**. **Annex B** shows the number of agency workers used by B/Ds in the past years.

7. As for the nature of work, the majority of agency workers were involved in providing clerical and administrative support.

8. Our brief analysis on the 1 216 agency workers used by B/Ds as at 30 September 2020 is set out below –

(a) Meeting urgent or unforeseen operational and service needs or unexpected surge in operational and service demands

The majority of the agency workers (76.1%) were used for this purpose. For example, the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency used about 70 agency workers to assist in processing applications under various financial assistance schemes for students. Moreover, HAB used about 60 agency workers to assist in the allowance programmes newly introduced under the CCF for the low-income persons, including “One-off Living Subsidy for Low-income Households Not Living in Public Housing and Not Receiving Social Security Assistance Programme” and “One-off Allowance for New Arrivals from Low-income Families”.

(b) Filling short-term manpower gap

On some occasions, civil service vacancies cannot be filled in a timely manner due to the lead time required for conducting recruitment. In this regard, about 13.3% of the agency workers were deployed to tide over the short-term manpower gap at the relevant workplaces.

(c) Catering for irregular work pattern

About 10.6% of the agency workers were deployed to meet operational and service needs that entailed an irregular work pattern or where the nature of work involved rendered it difficult to recruit and retain staff. For example, agency workers were used by the Department of Health to assist in conducting surprise inspections of drug stores, the work of which entailed irregular working hours.

A breakdown of the distribution by scope of the use of agency workers is at **Annex C**.

9. Among the 1 216 agency workers, about 40% were sourced from term contracts under which the employment agencies concerned were not required to provide service on a continuous basis throughout the contract period. Instead, agency workers were supplied only as and when required by the procuring B/Ds and with varying service durations, e.g. a few months/weeks or certain days in a week. The majority of those agency workers were used for meeting urgent or unforeseen operational and service needs or unexpected surge in operational and service demands, e.g. the agency workers used by B/Ds for handling the upsurge in workload arising from new subsidy allowance schemes.

Matters of Concern

10. In the past, Members have raised a few concerns over the use of agency workers. Our views on them and the actions taken are set out in paragraphs 11 to 17 below.

Proper use of agency workers

11. Members remind the Government from time to time to ensure the proper use of agency workers. As mentioned in paragraphs 4 and 5 above, CSB issued guidelines in April 2010 and April 2011 covering the scope for using agency workers, the approving authority, the wage requirement, renewal and re-letting of service contracts, etc. Every proposal to procure the service of agency workers is required to be considered and approved personally by an officer at Directorate Pay Scale D2 or above of the concerned B/D. We also collect statistics from B/Ds on their use of agency workers from time to time for monitoring purpose, and discuss with B/Ds to keep us abreast of the situation on their use of agency workers.

Wage protection for agency workers and sanctions

12. Some Members have previously raised concern over the wage level and fringe benefits of agency workers. When inviting quotations or tenders for the supply of agency workers, B/Ds must require all bidders to state the amount of wages which they would pay to their employees to be assigned to work in the procuring B/Ds should their bids be successful. B/Ds should also specify that the bids would be considered only if the wage amounts stated therein are not lower than the benchmark of the prevailing SMW² and one paid rest day is provided for every period of seven days.

13. B/Ds are also required to specify in the service contracts –

- (a) that the wages of the agency workers assigned to work in the procuring B/Ds cannot be less than the stated wages in the bids for the whole duration of the contracts concerned;
- (b) the mechanism for monitoring compliance with the wage requirement; and
- (c) the sanctions to be imposed in case of non-compliance, e.g. the contract will be terminated if the contractor is found to have paid wages less than the committed monthly wages of staff and/or

² The prevailing SMW rate is \$37.5 per hour.

made false declaration on the level of wage.

According to information provided by the procuring B/Ds, no employment agency had contravened the above wage requirements in the past three years.

14. Employment agencies are also required, in their capacity as the employers of agency workers and in accordance with the terms of contracts, to comply with the Employment Ordinance (EO) as well as other relevant legislation to provide employment benefits to agency workers. For example, agency workers are accorded the protection and benefits under the EO including those on payment of wages and restriction on deduction of wages. Moreover, subject to their meeting the relevant eligibility criteria, the agency workers concerned are entitled to rest days, paid statutory holidays, annual leave, sickness allowance, etc.

Provision of fringe benefits

15. Individual Members have previously suggested that the Government should provide civil service fringe benefits to agency workers. As agency workers are not government employees, the Government, as the service user, should not provide employment benefits to agency workers on behalf of their employers. Besides, since agency workers may be arranged by the employment agencies to work for service users other than the Government, the respective employment agencies, instead of the Government, should be responsible for the provision of any fringe benefits.

Avoiding prolonged use of agency workers

16. Individual Members have previously expressed concern over the prolonged use of certain agency workers. In this regard, we have reminded B/Ds that contracts should only be renewed or re-let with strong justifications. As a general guideline, the length of a contract for procurement of the service of agency workers (except term contracts) should not exceed nine months. B/Ds are required to seek approval from CSB if an existing contract is to be renewed or re-let and the aggregate period of contract service is expected to exceed 15 months. For example, extension of an existing nine-month contract by more than six months would require the approval of CSB. B/Ds have to provide full justifications to demonstrate that renewal or re-letting of

contracts in such circumstances is essential for the operation and service, and that there are no other more appropriate means to meet the relevant operational and service needs. In the past three years, CSB had not received any application for extending the service contract for the supply of agency workers for an aggregate service period exceeding 15 months.

17. Of the 1 216 agency workers used by B/Ds as at 30 September 2020, most of them (768 in number, or about 63%) were sourced from service contracts of nine months or less. The remaining 448 agency workers (about 37%) were mostly sourced from term contracts.

Conclusion

18. The use of agency workers has allowed B/Ds the necessary flexibility to reinforce their manpower on a temporary basis to respond to urgent, ad hoc or temporary operational and service needs, or to tide over short-term manpower gap. Such temporary manpower needs cannot be met in a timely manner by other means, such as employment of civil servants or non-civil service contract staff. There is, therefore, a continued need for B/Ds to use agency workers in appropriate situations to complement the civil service workforce in providing services to the public. On the other hand, we will continue to monitor the use of agency workers by B/Ds to ensure that it is within the prescribed scope and that agency workers are used only when fully justified.

Views Sought

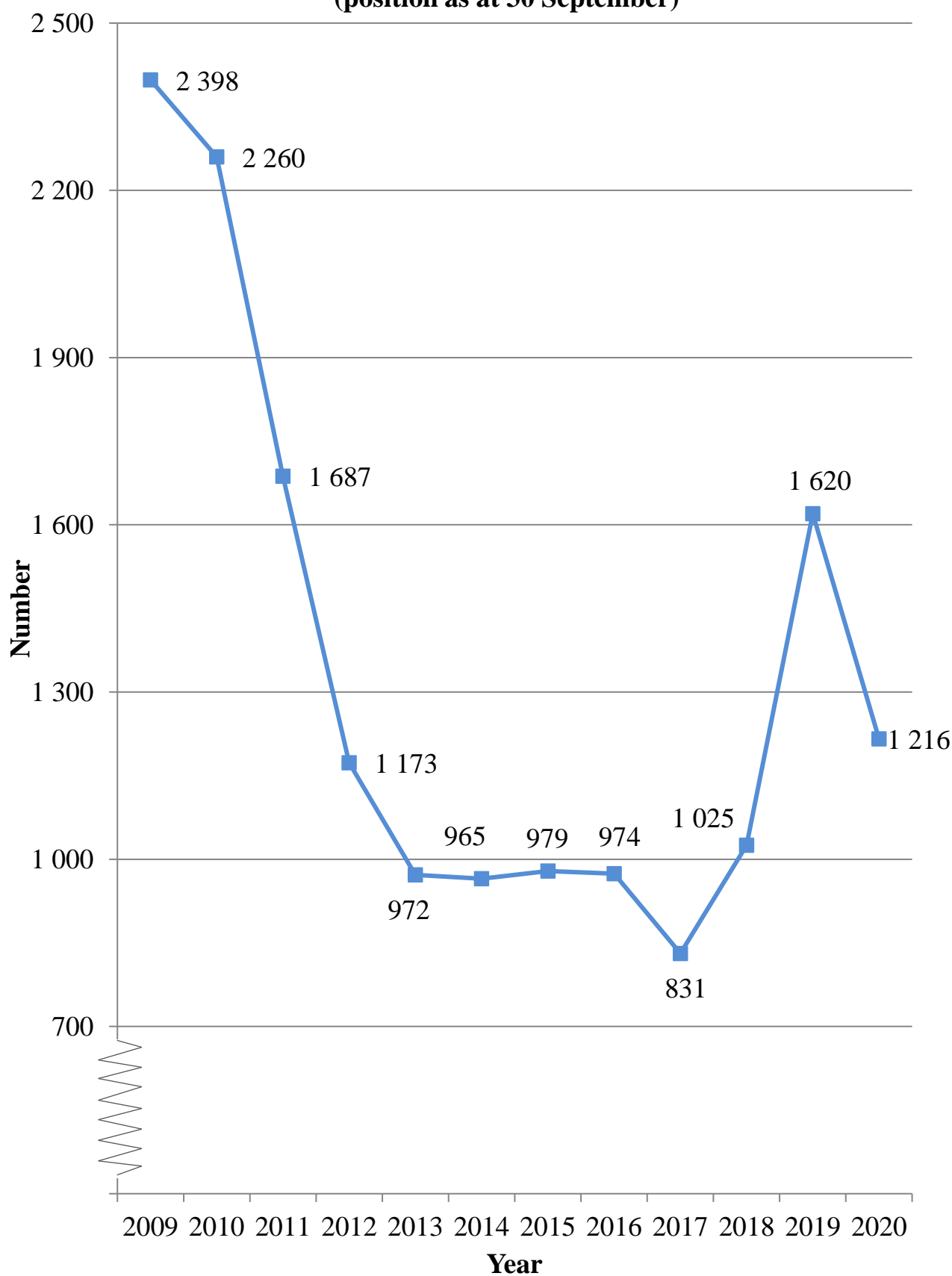
19. Members are invited to note the information in this paper and offer comments.

**Breakdown of the number of agency workers by bureaux/departments
(position as at 30 September 2020)**

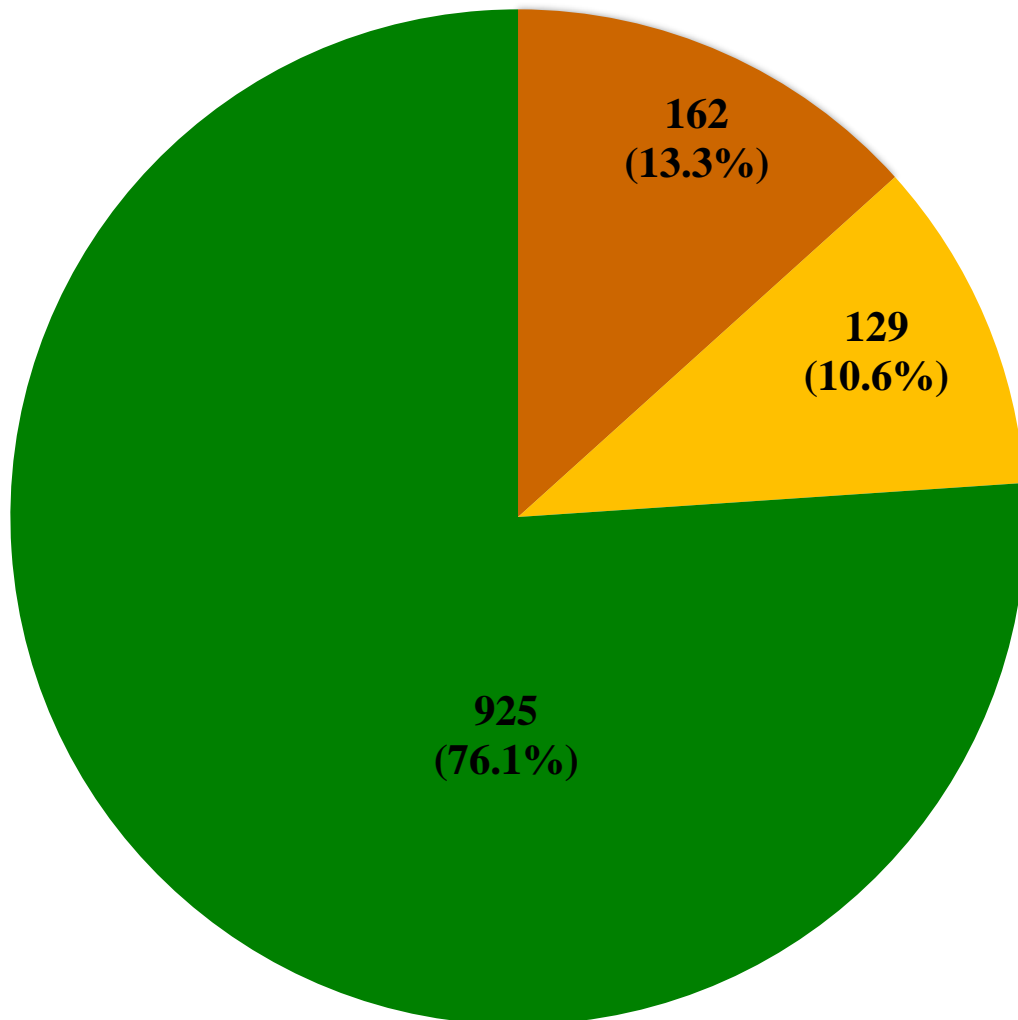
Bureau/Department	Number of agency workers
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department	18
Buildings Department	74
Census and Statistics Department	4
Chief Secretary and Financial Secretary's Offices	11
Civil Aid Service	20
Civil Engineering and Development Department	5
Commerce and Economic Development Bureau	11
Companies Registry	3
Correctional Services Department	10
Department of Health	90
Department of Justice	8
Development Bureau	11
Drainage Services Department	11
Education Bureau	141
Efficiency Office	4
Electrical and Mechanical Services Department	19
Environmental Protection Department	39
Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau	3
Fire Services Department	10
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department	118
Food and Health Bureau	23
Government Logistics Department	7
Government Property Agency	9
Home Affairs Bureau	59
Hong Kong Police Force	7
Hongkong Post	3
Immigration Department	27
Information Services Department	37
Innovation and Technology Bureau	2
Innovation and Technology Commission	8
Intellectual Property Department	3
Invest Hong Kong	4
Labour and Welfare Bureau	9

Bureau/Department	Number of agency workers
Lands Department	38
Leisure and Cultural Services Department	52
Marine Department	28
Official Receiver's Office	22
Planning Department	19
Rating and Valuation Department	38
Trade and Industry Department	9
Transport and Housing Bureau	6
Transport Department	16
University Grants Committee Secretariat	12
Water Supplies Department	62
Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency	106
Total	1 216

**Number of agency workers used by bureaux/departments
from 2009 to 2020
(position as at 30 September)**



**Breakdown by Scopes of Use of Agency Workers
(as at 30 September 2020)**



- To meet urgent or unforeseen operational and service needs or unexpected surge in operational and service demands for the short-term
- To fill short-term manpower gap
- To meet operational and service needs which entail irregular work patterns or where the nature of the work involved renders it difficult to recruit and retain staff