

3.4 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire of the Minister for Home Affairs regarding work permit permissions.

Can I ask the Minister for Home Affairs, having had a chance to review the current work permit permissions in detail, is the Minister able to provide the current numbers who have work permits and their dependants who may also work in Jersey and advise whether he considers this is a satisfactory situation, given the current high levels of unemployment in Jersey and the types of jobs that those with such permits and their dependants have access to?

Senator B.I. Le Marquand (The Minister for Home Affairs):

It is my intention to continue to strike the right balance between safeguarding the resident labour market, maintaining an effective immigration control of non-E.E.A. (European Economic Area) nationals and meeting the economic and social needs of the Island. The key issue, in my view, is as to whether local people are being displaced or disadvantaged as a result of work permit holders and their dependants coming to Jersey and I do not believe that that is so. I am unable to give a precise number to Deputy Le Claire of the number of people who currently have work permits because this requires an enormous amount of work to be done. We did this as a one-off matter at the end of last year and then there were 340 permit holders plus 199 dependants. I would expect the current figure to be of the order of about 50 higher than that due to the summer influx of people working in hospitality who would not have been there at that time but without doing a great deal more work, it is very difficult to provide detailed figures.

3.4.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Having read the written answers to my first written question this afternoon, I see the Minister is also proposing to review the policy in regard to work permits. While applauding him on keeping a watchful eye on these policies, can I ask him exactly how we are going to be able to determine when these people have completed, how they leave and exactly what types of skills they have because we have got sectors but we have got no understanding of the skills.

Senator B.I. Le Marquand:

I have listed in the written answer different categories of skills but, of course, within those different categories, an assessment is made in individual cases as to what available skills there are locally. Only where there are no local skills or indeed skills within the E.E.A. will work permits be, in general, permitted so there are all sorts of safeguards. In addition to that, I have mentioned in the written answer, of course, that I am looking at tightening up controls in a number of different ways: changing the minimum earnings threshold for jobs in finance, although they will still have to meet these other criteria which I have mentioned; altering the standard of advertising so that jobs are advertised more widely locally; introducing an English language requirement as a basic qualifying requirement in relation to people who would be coming in; and also we are planning to increase work permit application fees at the same time. So my intention is to tighten up slightly but it is a matter of balance.

3.4.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister accept that the balance between what used to be short-term seasonal permits for the hotel industry and agriculture, has now been replaced by much longer-term permits for professional classes?

Senator B.I. Le Marquand:

Frankly, there is an extraordinary mixture of things in work permits. For instance, if an entertainer is coming in to work for a weekend, he may have a permit. But the Deputy is right that certainly, as far as work permits are concerned, we do not issue any at all now or virtually none to agriculture and we are cutting back on the numbers to hospitality as well. That is an issue which I am still conducting a review on, had a meeting today on, and am considering exactly where we should go on that.

3.4.3 Deputy A.E. Jeune:

Picking up specifically on the I.T. (Information Technology) figures that were given to us, could the Minister advise why he believes there is such an increase in these I.T. positions and in what sectors are these permit holders working?

Senator B.I. Le Marquand:

If the Deputy is referring to the figure in the written answer; that is almost wholly explained by one contract entered into by Jersey Post for upgrading their computer system and where they entered into a contract, I understand, with an Indian company which has been sending Indian nationals over. We have quite a lot of Indians working at different times on short-term contracts in I.T. and in addition to that, of course, many of the international companies, banks and so on who operate here, have their own I.T. systems and therefore want to have people with expertise in those systems coming over and working on them. But the answer to the specific question why it has gone up from 3 to 26 is almost wholly explained by 15 in relation to one contract alone.

3.4.4 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Would the Minister agree with me that the work permit scheme, as run by himself and his department, is proving to be a very manageable and effective way of providing the correct jobs with the correct skills to the right people?

Senator B.I. Le Marquand:

That is exactly what we try to do. Of course, this only operates in relation to people who are not members of the E.E.A. and, in particular, of course, we sometimes have in areas like auditors and accountants a situation where we need people with a Commonwealth type of training to operate because there are different systems in different countries and that is why we sometimes need these specialist skills from outside the E.E.A.