

LCQ 2: Conversion of industrial buildings to transitional housing

Following is a question by the Dr Hon Lo Wai-kwok and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

The Chief Executive (CE) pointed out in last year's Policy Address that a task force under the Transport and Housing Bureau would actively render assistance to, and facilitate the implementation of, the various short-term community initiatives to increase the supply of transitional housing. The Government would also allow, under the relaunched measures to revitalise industrial buildings, wholesale conversion of industrial buildings into transitional housing. Moreover, CE has indicated in this year's Policy Address that in order not to lengthen the waiting time for families applying for public rental housing (PRH), redeveloping aged PRH estates will not be considered for the time being. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the functions and scope of work of the task force; whether they include consulting the trades and owners concerned and providing owners of industrial buildings with support and advisory services on conversion of industrial buildings into transitional housing; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will review the policies on and support measures for conversion of industrial buildings into transitional housing, including stipulating the renewal arrangement and the financial assistance for maintenance to which the owners are entitled annually, so that the owners will be more eager to pursue conversion of industrial buildings; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will consider converting some of the factory estates under the Hong Kong Housing Authority into transitional housing to temporarily accommodate residents affected by PRH redevelopment projects, so as to enable the commencement of the projects concerned; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the question raised by the Dr Hon Lo Wai-kwok is as follows:

One of the housing initiatives proposed in the 2019 Policy Address is the provision of 10 000 transitional housing units in the coming three years to alleviate the hardship faced by families waiting for Public Rental Housing

(PRH) and those living in unpleasant conditions.

A task force on transitional housing (Task Force) led by the Under Secretary has been established under the Transport and Housing Bureau in June 2018 to actively provide one-stop project co-ordination and professional support for community organisations. The Task Force maintains close co-operation with relevant parties holistically on transitional housing projects, including proposing, implementation, procurement and funding; co-ordinates the efforts from different policy bureaux and departments; and advises the administrative and statutory procedures to implement the projects and commence works as soon as possible. They are also responsible for monitoring the implementation and progress of various projects to ensure the use of resources is complying with the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, achieving value for money, ensuring progress and operation are being on the right track.

The Task Force had participated in more than 100 meetings and enquiry discussions with stakeholders last year, including community organisations and their hired professionals, professional institutions (such as architecture, surveying, engineering, planning and environment, etc), the contributors, commercial sector and owners who are interested for conversion of their industrial building into transitional housing, etc. They had gone through the preliminary architectural designs for the projects and issues relating to the environment, traffic assessment impact, fire safety and infrastructure with relevant government departments with a view to address problems promptly and obtain the necessary approval as soon as possible.

The Task Force has also convened six inter-bureau/departmental meetings, removing obstacles successfully and making progress in the conversion of industrial buildings. Regarding the limitation of the existing planning and design, a pragmatic approach will be adopted to favourably consider exercising flexibility in enforcing the building design requirements under the Buildings Ordinance. Exemptions or modifications will be granted to this type of projects, while compensation measures will be imposed without scarifying safety and hygiene concerns. The Town Planning Board (TPB) agreed that for transitional housing projects not exceeding five years, co-ordinated by the Task Force, in permanent buildings (including wholesale-converted industrial buildings in the 'Commercial', 'Comprehensive Development Area' and 'Other Specified Uses' annotated 'Business' and 'Residential' zones in the urban and new town areas) can be regarded as for temporary use, which is always permitted under the Outline Zoning Plan. The Lands Department will also exempt payment of waiver fees and associated costs for land applications related to the revitalisation of industrial buildings into transitional housing. If both the owner and community organisations are willing to continue the project, the Task Force will actively assist in applying for an extension. We will evaluate based on the time of application submission, while each term and thereafter extension will normally be five years.

The Task Force is currently studying several conversion of industrial building to transitional housing projects with community organisations and owners. Since these projects have yet reached the final decision stage, we consider it better to defer to the proponents to announce them when agreement

was reached.

The Task Force has sought the endorsement of the Panel on Housing of Legislative Council on the setup of a \$5 billion funding scheme to support the works expenses of transitional housing projects which also covers the conversion of industrial building. The ceiling works cost is set at \$550,000 per flat for conversion of non-domestic building. We will seek funding approval from the Finance Committee at the soonest possible to facilitate the early commencement of various transitional housing projects.

Community organisations operating transitional housing may reimburse their day-to-day management and maintenance expenses, as well as provision of appropriate supporting services expenses from the receivable rental income. They may flexibly determine the rent level based on merit of individual transitional housing project to ensure a balanced operation of each project.

Given the current acute shortage of public housing supply, we consider that sites suitable for constructing domestic blocks should be reserved for public housing development. The Housing Authority is exploring redevelopment of the existing industrial buildings to public housing, especially for rental blocks.

As a matter of fact, transitional housing projects are carried out by pooling various community care, efforts and resources. The Government will continue with its active facilitation and communication with the community, collaborating government and social resources to boost the supply of transitional housing and relieve the pressure of families living in unpleasant conditions and long waiting for PRH.