

# LCQ1: Anti-epidemic work in private buildings

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (November 4):

Question:

The Government indicated in April this year that it would commission consultancy firms to proactively inspect the external drainage pipes of 20 000 target private domestic and composite buildings across the territory (the inspection scheme) in order to reduce the risk of epidemic spreading. The Government has also allocated funding under the Anti-epidemic Fund for the creation of time-limited jobs to undertake the relevant tasks. Some members of the public have criticised the inspection scheme for not covering the repair works for problematic drainage pipes and the inadequacies in the number of buildings covered and the scope of inspection items. Regarding the anti-epidemic work in private buildings, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the implementation status of the inspection scheme, including the respective numbers of jobs created in various trades, the number of buildings inspected, the major problems uncovered in the drainage pipes, and the follow-up actions taken, so far; the total estimated expenditure and the anticipated completion date of the inspection scheme;

(2) whether it will expand the inspection scheme, including increasing the number of buildings covered and conducting more extensive epidemic prevention inspections on other common areas and facilities of the buildings (including lift lobbies, main gates, refuse chambers and ventilation systems); if not, of the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will provide subsidies for private building owners who have financial difficulties to help them meet the expenses arising from repairing drainage pipes and enhancing the overall epidemic prevention standards and facilities of their buildings; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Owners should take primary responsibility for the proper maintenance of their private properties, including regular inspection and maintenance of the drainage systems of their buildings to ensure that they are functioning well with a view to creating a safe and healthy living environment. Nevertheless, in face of the heightened public concerns about building drainage systems under the COVID-19, and the increasing unemployment rate in the construction industry due to economic downturn, the Government has launched a 24-month

special measure through the second round of the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) to inspect the external drainage systems of buildings (the inspection scheme).

The inspection scheme upholds the concept of "prevention is better than cure". The consultants engaged by the Buildings Department (BD) will, as a large-scale "health check", proactively inspect the external drainage systems of around 20 000 private residential or composite buildings across the territory. If the drainage systems are found to be defective upon inspection, the BD may serve orders under the Buildings Ordinance (BO) (Cap 123) to the owners concerned requiring them to arrange necessary further investigations and/or repairs.

To step up public education and publicity, when inspecting the external drainage systems of buildings, staff of the BD's consultants will also dispatch relevant materials to owners or occupiers. The consultants will also provide telephone enquiry services to owners.

My reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(1) The estimated expenditure of the inspection scheme is around \$300 million. Some 500 jobs for the construction industry, comprising 320 professional and technical jobs and 160 clerical jobs are expected to be created. The BD will also employ 36 professional, technical and clerical staff to implement the inspection scheme and undertake follow-up actions under the BO. Currently, the inspection scheme has created about 80 jobs for the construction industry and the BD has employed 20 staff. The remaining jobs will be created gradually as the BD awards more consultancy contracts for the inspection scheme. Furthermore, it is estimated that 2 000 repair works projects of various scale would be brought to the industry as individual buildings would need to repair the external drainage systems of their buildings subsequent to the implementation of the inspection scheme.

The inspection scheme has been implemented since June this year. The inspection of the 20 000 private residential or composite buildings is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2022, and the related follow-up actions six months after. As at the end of September this year, the BD's consultants have inspected about 1 100 buildings. Defects at external drainage pipes, including leaking or broken drainage pipes, mis-connection of drainage pipes, etc., were found in some buildings. The BD is now reviewing the consultants' reports and will take appropriate actions under the BO, such as issuing drainage repair orders requiring owners concerned to carry out the necessary repair works depending on case circumstances.

(2) The inspection scheme has currently covered all private residential or composite buildings exceeding three storeys in height across the territory. Generally speaking, as the titles of private buildings not exceeding three storeys in height are in fewer hands or even solely owned, arrangement of personnel to inspect the building external drainage systems is easier. Commercial or industrial buildings are used for operating businesses. Generally speaking, inspection for such buildings could be relatively easily arranged amongst themselves through property management. The Government currently has no plan to expand the inspection scheme to other types of

buildings such as commercial or industrial buildings.

The inspection scheme is targeted at the external drainage systems as disrepair at the external walls may not be detected by residents, and the external drainage systems could create significant impacts on building hygiene. Other common areas and facilities at the buildings, such as lift lobbies, main gates and refuse rooms could be inspected more readily. Regular cleaning and disinfection of the relevant areas and facilities is the most effective way to prevent them from becoming a medium for spreading virus. After all, the inspection scheme has to be targeted so that it could be commenced timely and completed in time to swiftly address public concerns on building drainage systems.

Apart from the inspection scheme, the BD under the AEF has a series of tasks, including to select, on top of the original 300 target buildings annually, 50 additional Category 2 buildings under the Operation Building Bright 2.0 between third quarter of 2020 and second quarter of 2021 for exercising its statutory power to conduct prescribed inspection and repair works under the Mandatory Building Inspection Scheme in default of the owners concerned; to expedite the discharge of non-compliant drainage repair orders and the cases of mis-connection of drainage systems; to enhance the efficiency of professional investigations on cases of water seepage in buildings, and to organise more public education and publicity activities, etc. Under the AEF, the BD will recruit a total of about 120 contract staff to meet the needs of the various tasks.

(3) Owners should take primary responsibility for the proper maintenance of their properties. Nevertheless, the Government recognises that some owners may have genuine difficulties in fulfilling their responsibility in maintaining their properties due to lack of financial means, technical knowledge and/or organisation ability. Therefore, apart from taking enforcement action to ensure that building owners would discharge their statutory responsibilities, the Government has also provided financial assistance to owners of private buildings to maintain and repair their buildings, including building drainage systems through various assistance and loan schemes. Key assistance and loan schemes comprise "Operation Building Bright 2.0", "Building Maintenance Grant Scheme for Needy Owners", "Building Safety Loan Scheme", and Urban Renewal Authority's "Home Renovation Interest-free Loan" and "Common Area Repair Works Subsidy". These schemes can effectively assist needy owners to inspect and repair the drainage systems of their buildings.

Thank you, President.