

LCQ1: Households in inadequate housing

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Priscilla Leung and a reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (October 27):

Question:

The Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council indicated earlier his hope that by the time the Country's second centennial goal was achieved, Hong Kong would have bid farewell to subdivided units (SDUs) and caged homes. There are views that apart from endeavouring to increase the supply of subsidized housing, the Government also needs to help households in inadequate housing such as caged homes, SDUs and cubicle apartments enhance their competitiveness, so that they can seize the opportunities for upward mobility, thereby moving out of inadequate housing through their own effort. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of households belonging to the following two categories currently living in inadequate housing: (i) low-income households who are not living in public housing, not receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) and have received one-off living subsidy, and (ii) households who are not living in public housing, not receiving CSSA, have waited for public housing for more than three years and are receiving the monthly cash allowance (not including non-elderly one-person public housing applicants);

(2) whether it will, by drawing reference from the "targeted poverty alleviation" strategy adopted by the Mainland authorities, help households in inadequate housing enhance their competitiveness through the provision of student learning support as well as services such as employment training and counselling, so that they can seize the opportunities for upward mobility, thereby being able to afford housing with a better living environment; and

(3) whether the Government will undertake that the development of transitional housing is only a temporary policy, and that it will not include that type of housing into the Long Term Housing Strategy as part of the housing ladder?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the relevant bureaux, my consolidated reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Priscilla Leung is as follows:

(1) According to the information provided by the Home Affairs Bureau, to relieve the financial pressure of low-income households not living in public housing and not receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), the Community Care Fund (CCF) provided two rounds of one-off living subsidy

to these households in 2020-21. As at end-September 2021, around 115 000 households benefitted under the first round of subsidy. It is expected that around 118 000 households would benefit under the second round.

The Government launched the three-year Cash Allowance Trial Scheme (CATS) in late June this year to provide cash allowance to eligible public rental housing (PRH) General Applicant (GA) households (i.e. applicant households with two or more persons, and applicants under the Single Elderly Priority Scheme) who are not living in PRH, not receiving CSSA, and have waited for PRH for more than three years but have not been offered the first PRH allocation, with a view to relieving the pressure on livelihood of grassroots families which have waited for PRH allocation for a prolonged period of time. As at end-September 2021, the Government had disbursed cash allowances to over 50 000 eligible PRH General Applicant households.

In the two rounds of one-off living subsidy and the three-year CATS mentioned above, applicants are not required to declare if they reside in "inadequate" housing during application. As such, we do not have the relevant information.

(2) Poverty alleviation is one of the policy priorities of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. Bureaux and departments (B/Ds) have been implementing appropriate support measures in accordance with their areas of responsibility. B/Ds have devised relevant eligibility criteria and publicised these measures to enable the needy to come forward to apply. The Government's poverty alleviation measures can effectively provide support to the target groups across the community. Applications are processed according to the applicable criteria. Such arrangements are open and transparent.

As mentioned in the Chief Executive's Policy Address announced recently, the HKSAR Government sets the official poverty line based on the concept and methodology of "relative poverty" which only measures income without considering assets. The objective is to monitor the poverty situation, alleviate poverty with targeted efforts and render the necessary assistance through regular data collection and analysis. According to statistics released at the end of last year, after taking into account all the cash and PRH benefits, the size of the poor population in 2019 decreased significantly from the pre-intervention of 1.49 million to 0.64 million. This shows that policies and measures can effectively achieve the function of income redistribution and lift the grassroots out of poverty.

Apart from the two measures for relieving difficulties faced by low-income families who are not living in public housing and are not receiving CSSA as mentioned in the first part of the question, the CCF also implemented the "Assistance Programme to Improve the Living Environment of Low-income Subdivided Unit Households" to improve their living environment. The Government has also introduced various support measures under different policy areas to cater for the needs of the underprivileged in various aspects. Please refer to the Annex for these support measures.

The Government will continue to care for the needs of the

underprivileged, including households in inadequate housing, and formulate appropriate policies to provide them with suitable support. Relevant B/Ds also endeavour to provide them with more information relevant to the support measures through suitable channels, organisations and groups, and assist them to apply for these measures.

(3) Actively identifying land for housing construction is the fundamental solution to increasing public housing supply. The Government has been adopting a multi-pronged approach to identify and form land, which is an effective way to forge ahead increasing land supply in a sustained and all-embracing manner. After several years of efforts, the Government has identified about 350 hectares of land which can produce some 330 000 public housing units for the coming 10-year period (i.e. from 2022-23 to 2031-32), and can meet the estimated public housing demand of around 301 000 units in the same 10-year period. Public housing production in the five-year tenure of the current-term Government is expected to reach 96 500 units, which is 30 000 units more than the previous five-year period.

To achieve the above 10-year public housing production, various Government departments are striving to take forward relevant work and to improve internal coordination, with a view to completing the necessary land forming process and handing over the sites for development in time. We also endeavour to optimise the development potential of each and every public housing site and to expedite the development process.

When the relevant housing supply is not yet available, the Government has been actively taking forward the implementation of transitional housing through better use of short term vacant land and buildings with a view to providing transitional housing to people with pressing housing needs. This will alleviate the hardship faced by families living in inadequate housing and have been waiting for PRH for a long time. As transitional housing is of short-term nature, the timing and amount of its supply are not stable and will change at times. Therefore, it is not suitable to include transitional housing in the housing supply in the next ten years, nor is it suitable to include transitional housing in the housing ladder.