

LCQ10: Safety of the staircases of pedestrian walkways

Following is a question by the Hon JoePHY Chan and a written reply by the Secretary for Housing, Ms Winnie Ho, in the Legislative Council today (December 6):

Question:

Many members of the public have relayed to me that the outdoor temporary footbridge connecting Cheung Hong Commercial Complex No. 1 and Cheung Ching Bus Terminus (the temporary footbridge) has been poorly designed. For instance, the steps are too steep, making it inconvenient for pedestrians to go up and down, and increasing the risk of elderly people losing their footing and tripping. According to my measurement, the width of the treads of the steps and the height of the steps of the temporary footbridge are 250 mm and 170 mm respectively. Although they are in compliance with the standards stipulated in regulation 39 of the Building (Planning) Regulations (Cap. 123F) for the main staircases of buildings, they are not in compliance with the standards stipulated in section 25 of the Third Schedule to the Regulations for external staircases. Moreover, it is learnt that the staircases of many pedestrian walkways in Hong Kong have similar problems. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the numbers of enquiries, complaints and accident reports relating to the design of the temporary footbridge received by the Government since its commissioning; whether the Government will consider conducting an in-depth investigation into and collecting the views of nearby residents on the usage of the temporary footbridge, as well as appointing professional engineers to conduct site inspections to reassess the temporary footbridge's suitability for use and safety risks, with a view to expeditiously rectifying irregularities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has plans to comprehensively inspect the staircases of all permanent and temporary pedestrian walkways in Hong Kong to ensure that their designs are in compliance with the existing legal standards, and request the relevant government departments and/or contractors to rectify irregularities and/or provide barrier-free access when they are found; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) in view of the ageing population in Hong Kong, whether the authorities will consider reviewing Cap. 123F and the Design Manual: Barrier Free Access 2008 published by the Buildings Department, so as to introduce for staircases used by a relatively large number of elderly people more stringent design standards (e.g. increasing the width of steps and lowering the height of steps), thereby further improving safety and reducing the risks of accidents?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) has all along accorded priority to caring and safety with a view to fostering inclusive estate environments. In consultation with the Transport and Logistics Bureau and the Development Bureau, our reply to the question raised by the Hon JoePHY Chan is as follows:

(1) In order to facilitate the public housing development at Ching Hong Road North Phase 3 (Phase 3) and to maintain a pedestrian connection between Cheung Ching Estate and Cheung Hong Estate during the construction period of Phase 3, the HA has constructed a temporary covered footbridge over the slope adjoining Phase 3 to replace the pedestrian passage connecting the Cheung Hong commercial complex and the bus terminus in Cheung Ching Estate, which will be demolished. Since the opening of the temporary covered footbridge on October 13, 2023, the HA has not received any accident reports in relation to the usage of the staircases of the temporary covered footbridge. The HA has however received enquiries and opinions raised by individual Legislative Council Members, individual members of the District Council concerned, and residents of the estates regarding the design of the staircases.

Although HA's building works and buildings are exempted from the Buildings Ordinance (Cap. 123) (BO), the HA has all along been striving to adhere to the requirements of the BO and its subsidiary regulations, as well as the relevant codes of practices and guidelines promulgated by the Buildings Department (BD) from time to time, including the provisions to facilitate access to and use of barrier-free access facilities in the buildings.

Under the definition of the Building (Planning) Regulations (Cap. 123F), the temporary covered footbridge at Cheung Ching Estate is defined as a temporary building which is exempted from the requirements of the provision of barrier-free access. The width of landing, treads and height of the step risers, and the height and installation of handrails in the temporary covered footbridge are all in compliance with the requirements of the Building (Planning) Regulations (Cap. 123F). Nevertheless, in response to the opinions and suggestions received from the aforementioned stakeholders, the HA has conducted a review on the design and usage of the temporary covered footbridge. Based on the preliminary studies, it was considered that, from technical point of view, there is room for enhancement, including widening the treads and reducing height of the risers. The HA is consolidating the proposed enhancements and will liaise closely with relevant stakeholders on the proposed enhancements, with a view to commencing the works as soon as possible.

In the meantime, the HA is also proactively reviewing the feasibility for early completion of the shuttle lifts located in the commercial centre of Phase 3. Upon the completion of the works at Phase 3, it is more convenient for residents to reach the bus terminus in Cheung Ching Estate from Cheung Hong Estate via this permanent barrier-free access.

(2) For public footbridges and subways managed by the Transport Department (TD) and the Highways Department (HyD), staircases of such public pedestrian facilities shall be designed in accordance with the relevant guidelines in the Transport Planning and Design Manual of TD. The guidelines stipulate that new staircases should have a tread width of not less than 280 millimetres (mm), a height of not more than 150 mm, and the flight of steps in each section of the staircase should be no more than 12, unless restricted by space or other factors. Before commissioning, these public pedestrian facilities are required to pass the acceptance procedures of TD and HyD to confirm that they have been properly constructed in accordance with the relevant standards applicable at the time. After the facilities have been opened for public use, HyD will conduct regular inspections and arrange for the necessary repairs and maintenance in a timely manner to ensure that they are maintained in good condition for use by pedestrians.

As for the structures on private land, pursuant to the powers under the BO, the BD supervises the planning, design and construction of buildings and associated works on private land to ensure compliance with safety and health standards. The BO also stipulates building design and construction standards in respect of structural, fire safety and health for this purpose.

In respect of the aforementioned buildings under the regulation of the BO, section 25 of Division 7 of the Third Schedule (concerning design to facilitate persons with a disability) of section 72 of the Building (Planning) Regulations (Cap. 123F) and paragraph 25 of Division 7 of the Design Manual: Barrier-Free Access 2008 (2021 Edition) (Design Manual) stipulate the obligatory design requirements for the required staircases and the main circulation staircases in common areas of a building (including internal and external staircases), such as the width of treads of staircases, height of risers of staircases, etc. If the building plans do not comply with the relevant requirements, the BD will refuse to issue plan approval.

Under the Operation Check Walk scheme, the BD selects 15 commercial buildings (mainly shopping arcades) each year to inspect whether barrier-free access and facilities in the buildings are in compliance with and maintain the specifications of the original plans approved by the BD. If irregularities of barrier-free access and facilities are found, the BD will issue statutory orders under the regulations of the BO to require the owners concerned to rectify the irregularities.

(3) The BD has all along maintained a technical committee comprising representatives from relevant government bureaux and departments, building professional institutes, the academia and the rehabilitation sector (including persons with disabilities) to continually review the barrier-free design standards for implementation through statutory requirements or administrative means/recommendations by collecting and listening to the views of the building sector, the rehabilitation sector and relevant stakeholders having regard to the practical experience in the use of the Design Manual, advancement in building design, technology and construction methods, and the latest relevant overseas regulatory controls and standards. For example,

taking into account the advice of the technical committee, the BD will revise the recommended design requirements for external staircases in the first quarter of next year to increase the width of treads from 280mm to 300mm and to reduce the height of risers from 160mm to 150mm, so as to make it safer and more convenient to use the staircases.

In face of an ageing population, elderly-friendly building design would be promoted as announced in the Policy Address this year. The Deputy Financial Secretary will co-ordinate with the relevant bureaux to put forward proposals next year for incorporating universal design concepts (i.e. enabling use by the widest range of persons as far as possible) and accessibility (i.e. facilitating mobility) into the Design Manual. The BD will engage a consultant to conduct a comprehensive review of the Design Manual, including its Chapter 6 regarding the design guidelines for the elderly and elderly with frailty, so as to better cater for the needs of the elderly and other people with frailty or impaired mobility.