

# LCQ12: Occupational safety for repair and maintenance work for installations on external walls of buildings

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (January 30):

Question:

Some trade union representatives have relayed to me that due to design deficiencies of the external walls of over 150 buildings completed between 2003 and 2016, strong and stable truss-out bamboo scaffolds cannot be erected onto such external walls. As a result, it is difficult for workers to carry out repair and maintenance work for installations on such external walls and the workers' occupational safety is jeopardised. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) Whether it will enhance the contents on how to erect strong and stable truss-out bamboo scaffolds in the Code of Practice for Bamboo Scaffolding Safety, including how workers can fasten scaffolds onto the external walls using three expansion anchor bolts in a situation where there is not enough space to do so or where the external walls are made of materials which cannot provide the necessary support; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) Whether it will comprehensively update the Code of Practice for Safe Use and Operation of Suspended Working Platforms to set out clearly (i) the uses of the suspended working platforms (e.g. whether, in addition to carrying workers, heavy weights can be carried on the platform at the same time), and (ii) the circumstances under which the employers' provision of a suspended working platform cannot be regarded as their having provided a safe means of access for workers; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) Given that currently there are many buildings with deficiencies in the designs of their external walls, making it difficult for workers to carry out repair and maintenance work for installations on their external walls, of the authorities' remedial measures to ensure the occupational safety of such workers; and

(4) Whether it will, by drawing reference from the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations of the United Kingdom, enact legislation to stipulate that developers, contractors, and the relevant professionals must take into account the needs of future repair and maintenance work for installations on external walls when designing new buildings, so as to ensure that the risk of the relevant work is reduced to a minimum; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government is highly concerned about work-at-height safety (including work carried out at external walls of buildings). The Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance (Cap. 509), the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance (Cap. 59) and their subsidiary regulations, administered by the Labour Department (LD), stipulate the safety requirements for work-at-height, including erecting safe working platforms and equipping them with secure fences, providing safe access and egress, and furnishing workers with suitable fall arresting devices when necessary. Before commencing work, duty-holders shall conduct task-specific risk assessment with due regard to site environment. The safe working methods so formulated should take into account the concerned working environment and risks, so as to safeguard workers' safety at work.

In consultation with the Development Bureau and the Buildings Department (BD), a consolidated reply is provided as follows:

(1) to (3) In order to help contractors/employers understand and comply with the legal requirements with regard to work-at-height, LD has published various Codes of Practice (CoP)/Guidelines, which set out practical operation requirements and safety measures in respect of external wall work safety in general working environment and conditions.

As the designs of external walls of buildings vary, contractors/employers have the duty to conduct task-specific risk assessment before commencing repair and maintenance works at external walls, including taking the actual working environment and conditions (such as the uniqueness of building design) into consideration. Based on the risk assessment results, contractors/employers should formulate appropriate safe working methods, procedures and necessary safety measures, including the provision of suitable working platforms and fall arresting devices for the workers and ensuring their proper use, so as to comply with statutory work safety requirements. When necessary, they should seek professional advice.

LD is however aware that the external wall designs of some residential buildings constructed in recent years are not conducive to the adoption of common work methods for repair works and replacement of facilities, that involve work at height, at external walls of buildings. In view of this, LD will work with relevant professionals to study and analyse the external wall designs of these buildings and identify possible problems encountered when common work methods are used to conduct external wall works. Subject to the study findings, LD will make recommendations relating to these problems. LD will commence the work as soon as possible.

(4) BD reviews the subsidiary legislation under the Buildings Ordinance (Cap. 123) from time to time and proposes suitable amendments as necessary with a view to keeping abreast of latest building technology advancement and responding to the industry's requests. Specifically, upon reviewing the Building (Construction) Regulations (B(C)R) (Cap. 123B), BD proposes

introduction of requirements mandating the provision of adequate safety facilities in the design of new buildings to facilitate future repair and maintenance works at external walls. Apart from the relevant proposed amendment, BD also proposes that the provisions of B(C)R be comprehensively transformed into performance-based instead of prescribing a set of standards applicable to all buildings so as to allow greater flexibility in building design thus catering for the rapid building technology advancements. Along this direction, when the amended regulations commence operation, BD will require Authorized Persons to provide information on the facilities for external repair of buildings, such as working platforms that conform to occupational safety and health legislation, etc. Such facilities must be specified on the building plans for consideration and approval by BD. To complement the proposed amended regulations, BD has completed a draft code of practice on design for safety for external maintenance and is now consulting the building industry following the established procedures.