

LCQ18: Vacant school premises under the Education Bureau

Following is a question by the Hon Ip Kin-yuen and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (October 30):

Question:

It has been reported that the Education Bureau (EDB) has planned to lend the premises of a primary school, which will soon be vacated, to a service organisation for the visually impaired, for use as a decanting site for the sheltered workshop under it. Regarding the vacant school premises under the EDB, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) when the application for borrowing the school premises concerned from the aforesaid organisation was received, the time taken for vetting and approval of the application, and the reasons for approving the application, by the EDB, and the duration of the tenancy;

(2) given that the facilities in the school premises concerned are not even up to current standards, whether the Government had assessed if the school premises were suitable for operating a sheltered workshop or factory; if it had assessed and the outcome was in the affirmative, of the method and criteria adopted for the assessment, as well as the details of the assessment outcome (including whether the premises could accommodate the workshop's existing large-scale machinery, whether the various floors could withstand the weight of such machinery, the maximum number of trainees that the premises could accommodate, and whether the workshop in operation would generate noise exceeding the standards);

(3) whether, before approving the said service organisation's application, the EDB had received other applications for borrowing the school premises concerned; if so, of the details of such applications, including (i) the number of such applications, (ii) the dates of receipt, (iii) the nature of business in which the applicants were engaged, (iv) the proposed uses of the school premises, and (v) the reasons for such applications being rejected;

(4) of the long-term planned uses of the school premises concerned and of its site;

(5) of the following details in respect of each application approved in each of the past five school years for borrowing school premises under the EDB (set out in a table):

- (i) the name of the school which had used the premises concerned before the premises were left vacant;
- (ii) the address of the premises;
- (iii) the floor area of the premises;

(iv) the number of years for which the premises had been left vacant;
(v) the name and type of the borrower unit (e.g. policy bureau/government department, school sponsoring body, non-profit making organisation);
(vi) the proposed use(s);
(vii) the number of years of borrowing the premises; and
(viii) the charges/rents for borrowing the premises;

(6) of the current channel(s) through which the public can access the information about those vacant school premises under the EDB that are available for borrowing; and

(7) whether non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (including schools) may apply for borrowing vacant or soon-to-be-vacated school premises under the EDB at present; if so, of the details, including (i) the channel(s) for making applications, (ii) the vetting and approval procedure, (iii) the approving authority, (iv) the criteria for vetting and approval of applications, as well as (v) whether policy bureaux/government departments are given priority for borrowing the premises; if NGOs may not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In response to the questions raised by Hon Ip Kin-yuen regarding the use of vacant school premises (VSP), a consolidated reply is as follows:

(1) to (4) In response to a request from the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) raised in March 2019, the Education Bureau (EDB) reviewed the list of vacant and to-be-vacant premises under its purview with a view to identifying a suitable premises for decanting a Factory for the Blind under a service organisation for persons with visual impairment during its in-situ redevelopment. At that time, it was envisaged that an aided primary school in Kwun Tong District would be reprovisioned to a new school premises in the same district in September 2019 and its existing school premises would be surrendered to the Government. On that concerned vacant school premises, the EDB decided to earmark it for long-term school development use after conducting a review under the established mechanism for handling VSP. It was however anticipated that the concerned VSP would be left vacant in the coming few years before the development plan is taken forward. With the policy objective of putting VSP into gainful use in mind, the EDB provided the related information to the LWB for the concerned service organisation to consider if the concerned VSP would be suitable for the intended short-term social welfare use.

It is understood that the Social Welfare Department has referred the proposal to the concerned service organisation for consideration in April 2019. After assessing the nearby environment, traffic and site area of the concerned VSP, and conducting preliminary technical assessments, the service organisation concerned considered the concerned VSP suitable for decanting its Factory. It is now conducting further planning work over the use of the concerned VSP, equipment and renovation arrangements and more. The service

organisation concerned will ensure that the operation of the Factory at the decanting site will comply with relevant statutory requirements and standards. According to the current plan, the service organisation would need to use the concerned VSP up to 2025.

Apart from the LWB, a time-limited school has written to the EDB in March for using part of the concerned VSP for school activities use. After considering all the relevant factors, including that the school concerned has already ceased to admit Primary One students as from the 2019/20 school year, its actual operation arrangements, the prevailing established mechanism for allocating school premises for school use, the concerned VSP may be used for temporary social welfare use or other uses, it is considered that the request could not be acceded to.

(5) to (7) It has all along been the EDB's policy objective to put VSP into gainful use. When there is a vacant or to-be-vacant school premises, the EDB will assess the VSP's suitability for school or other educational uses having regard to factors including the size, location and physical conditions of the relevant premises, as well as the educational needs and relevant policy measures. When the EDB confirms that the VSP is no longer required by the EDB for reallocation for school use, the EDB will, in accordance with the Central Clearing House Mechanism, inform the Planning Department (PlanD) and other relevant departments (such as the Lands Department and the Housing Department) for the PlanD's consideration of suitable alternative long-term uses.

All the VSP under the EDB's purview are earmarked/retained for school or other educational uses, including catering for the anticipated demand for school places, reprovisioning of existing schools to improve their learning and teaching environment, decanting use by schools undergoing in-situ redevelopment or extension works, etc. As at end-August 2019, there were 10 VSP under the EDB's purview which had been earmarked/retained for school or other educational uses. We are taking forward the allocation arrangements for five of the VSP.

According to the prevailing school allocation mechanism, when the EDB confirms that a school premises can be allocated for school reprovisioning or physical extension use, the EDB will in general conduct a School Allocation Exercise (SAE) on an open, fair and competitive basis. The EDB will make relevant announcement through press release and on its website to openly invite applications from all eligible organisations in the territory. Schools may take note of such relevant announcement and consider if they would submit applications having regard to their school-based considerations. Quality of education is the prime consideration of the School Allocation Committee, which comprises both official and non-official members, in assessing the applications. Other factors, such as operation track records of the school sponsoring bodies (if applicable), the school proposals after reprovisioning, condition of existing school premises, locations of the applicant schools (i.e. whether they are currently operating in the same district as the location of the new school premises), will also be taken into account.

For VSP that are pending deployment for long-term use but without

suitable short-term educational use for the time being, the EDB, along the policy objective of putting VSP into gainful use, circulates information of such VSP within the Government on a half-yearly basis with a view to letting other bureaux/departments use such VSP for suitable short-term non-educational purposes. However, such VSP are not available for application by non-government organisations direct.

From the 2014/15 to 2018/19 school year, no VSP under the EDB's purview has been used by other bureaux/departments for short-term non-educational purposes.