

LCQ20: Planning for vacant kindergarten premises

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (December 11):

Question:

It has been reported that nearly 80 kindergartens in Hong Kong have ceased operation in the past four years, and some of the premises of these kindergartens are located in public housing estates or government properties. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the statistics on kindergartens ceasing operation in the past five years, including geographical distribution, floor areas of the involved premises, and whether the premises concerned are government properties (including those of the Hong Kong Housing Authority); if the premises concerned are government properties, of their current or planned uses;
- (2) given the persistent low birth rate and population ageing in Hong Kong, whether the Government will consider converting some of the vacant kindergarten premises in its possession to elderly homes or other elderly facilities; if not, of the reasons for that; and
- (3) given that the Government had announced in the 2019-20 Budget that it would allocate \$20 billion to purchase properties for accommodating welfare facilities, but as of March 31, 2023, the Social Welfare Department had only used about \$150 million of that funding for such purposes, and there are views that the measure is obviously ineffective, whether the Government will first make good use of the aforesaid vacant kindergarten premises for welfare purposes and consider reallocating all or part of the aforesaid funding for other purposes?

Reply:

President,

Kindergartens (KGs) in Hong Kong are all along privately run with diverse modes of operation. Individual school sponsoring bodies (SSBs) or operators may, having regard to their different development targets and circumstances, consider setting up KGs at a variety of premises, such as self-owned premises, privately-leased premises or premises in public housing estates. Every year, there may be new registrations of KGs in different districts, or some KGs may decide to cease operation owing to a variety of factors (such as profitability and tenancy matters).

Having consulted the Housing Bureau and the Labour and Welfare Bureau,

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

(1) The number of KGs which ceased operation in the past five school years is tabulated at Annex 1. The number of vacant KG premises located in non-domestic premises under the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) upon termination of the tenancy and surrender of the premises is tabulated at Annex 2.

If the tenant of a KG premises located in a public housing estate ceases to operate the KG during the tenancy period or decides not to renew the tenancy upon expiry, the HA will notify and invite the Education Bureau (EDB) to consider whether there is a need to nominate new non-profit-making KG SSBs or operators to rent the relevant units. Factors to be considered include the supply of and demand for KG places in the areas concerned, whether the floor area, location and building condition of the vacant KG premises are suitable for reallocation for KG development. Upon confirmation that the vacant KG premises are not required for EDB Kindergarten Premises Allocation Exercise through which SSBs or operators are nominated to rent the vacant units at a concessionary rate (approximately half of the market rent), the HA will offer such vacant units for lease at market rent through open tender for other organisations to operate KGs. If the units cannot be leased out through open tender for KG operation, the HA will consider converting the units for other uses (including welfare purposes) so as to make good use of resources. Any proposed change of use of the units will be subject to the outcome of feasibility studies, including whether it is in compliance with the Buildings Ordinance (Cap. 123) and relevant regulations, land use restrictions, planning restrictions, environmental factors and views of residents or stakeholders.

(2) To address the increasing demand for elderly services arising from an ageing population, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) increases the supply of subsidised residential care places through a multi-pronged approach, such as liaising with relevant departments to identify suitable sites for the construction of new contract residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), or converting vacant government premises/school sites into RCHEs. Nonetheless, KG premises are not suitable for the provision of RCHEs as their settings and facilities are generally speaking not designed for providing residential care services for frail elderly persons.

(3) The Government has all along been adopting a multi-pronged approach to identify suitable sites or premises for the provision of welfare services to meet their acute demand.

The SWD has been maintaining close contact with relevant departments to identify suitable sites in the development or redevelopment of public housing estates and urban renewal projects for providing welfare facilities. The Government also endeavours to increase the provision of welfare facilities as appropriate through the Land Sale Programmes and the Special Scheme on Privately Owned Sites for Welfare Uses. In addition, the Government will make the best use of available government accommodation including vacant school premises and explore whether they are suitable for conversion into welfare facilities.

In parallel, the SWD identifies suitable premises for purchase in the private market for welfare purpose. As at end-November 2024, the SWD has spent about \$240 million for the purchase of five premises for operating a Parents/Relatives Resource Centre, a Support Centre for Persons with Autism and a neighbourhood elderly centre, and for providing on-site pre-school rehabilitation services. The progress of purchasing premises depends on the availability of suitable properties in the market and various external factors, including whether the properties for sale have fire safety and barrier-free access facilities, whether the size and location meet operational requirements, whether the surrounding land uses are compatible with welfare uses, and whether the selling prices fall within the acceptable price range determined by the Government Property Agency (GPA) with reference to market value. The SWD and the GPA will continue to identify and purchase premises for the provision of welfare facilities in accordance with the ambit of the funds approved by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council.