

LCQ20: Residential care homes for elderly

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

Quite a number of members of the public have relayed that the waiting time for admission to subsidised residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs) has become longer and longer due to the persistent shortage of the places therein, and carers taking care of elderly persons single-handedly at home bear tremendous pressure. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of elderly persons currently waiting for admission to subsidised RCHEs and the average waiting time; the new measures to be put in place in the coming three years to shorten the waiting time;

(2) given that where developers are willing to incorporate certain lease conditions in their real estate development projects to ensure the provision of eligible RCHE premises, they may apply for exemption from payment of premiums for the premises concerned under the "Scheme to Encourage Provision of RCHE Premises in New Private Developments", of the respective numbers of relevant applications received, approved and rejected by the Government since the Scheme was launched in 2003; if there were rejected applications, of the reasons for that; whether it will consider relaxing the eligibility criteria and streamlining the application procedure, so as to encourage developers to participate in the Scheme;

(3) of the total number of applications received by the Government in the past 10 years for exemption from payment of premiums in respect of the construction of private RCHEs that meet the requirements of the Social Welfare Department; and

(4) given that in order to protect the safety of elderly residents in the event of emergencies, it is stipulated in section 20 of the Residential Care Homes (Elderly Persons) Regulation (Cap. 459A) that all parts of a residential care home shall be situated at a height not more than 24 metres above the ground floor, but the Director of Social Welfare may authorise any part of the residential care home to be exempted from complying with such height restriction, of the respective numbers of exemption applications received and approved by the Director in the past 10 years, which had been made for the following purpose: to accommodate non-domestic portions such as the laundry room, kitchen and storeroom at a height more than 24 metres above the ground floor, so as to release more space on the lower floors for the provision of places for the elderly?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) As at end-December 2020, the waiting time and number of people waitlisted for subsidised care and attention (C&A) places and nursing home (NH) places are as follows:

Service type	Average waiting time (in months) (Average of the previous 3 months) (Note 1)	No. of people waitlisted
C&A places	21	31 426 (Note 2)
NH places	26	6 099 (Note 3)

Note 1: It is the average number of months taken (from the waitlist date to the admission date) for normal cases to be admitted to subsidised Residential Care Homes for the Elderly (RCHEs) in the past three months. Cases accorded priority in allocation of places, cases with inactive history admitted in the past three months, and cases transferred from homes for the aged places to the converted C&A places providing a continuum of care in the same RCHE have been excluded in the calculation because their waiting time may be extraordinarily long or short in comparison with that of normal cases.

Note 2: The figure includes the elderly persons using subsidised community care services (CCS) while waiting for subsidised C&A places, but does not include the elderly persons classified as "inactive" cases on the Central Waiting List (CWL).

Note 3: The figure includes the elderly persons using subsidised CCS while waiting for subsidised NH places, but does not include the elderly persons classified as "inactive" cases on the CWL.

The Government will continue to take a multi-pronged approach to increase elderly service places through long, medium and short-term strategies. As a long-term strategy, the Government has reinstated the population-based planning ratio in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines in respect of elderly facilities in late 2018, specifying a ratio of 21.3 subsidised RCHE places to 1 000 elderly persons aged 65 or above. This is to set a clear service provision target for future planning work. As regards the medium-term strategy, the Government is taking forward 66 development projects which will provide about 8 800 RCHE places (including subsidised and non-subsidised places) and about 2 800 subsidised day care service place in the coming few years. Besides, in accordance with the 2020 Policy Address, the Government has invited the Hong Kong Housing Authority and the Hong Kong Housing Society to explore reserving about 5 per cent of the total domestic gross floor area in future public housing development projects exclusively for welfare uses, which include the much-needed RCHEs,

without affecting the public housing supply and other ancillary facilities. In respect of short-term strategies, the Pilot Scheme on Residential Care Service Voucher (RCSV) for the Elderly has been implemented since March 2017 in order to issue a maximum of 3 000 RCSVs in batches, offering elderly persons in need of residential care service an additional choice. In addition, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) will purchase an additional 5 000 EA1 places in private RCHEs under the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme over five years starting from 2019-20 to increase the supply of subsidised RCHE places and enhance the overall service quality of private RCHEs.

Apart from the aforesaid measures, the Labour and Welfare Bureau will continue to implement the Special Scheme on Privately Owned Sites for Welfare Uses (Special Sites Scheme) with a view to encouraging non-governmental organisations to better utilise their own sites through expansion, redevelopment or new development to provide diversified subvented and self-financing services. According to the latest proposals from applicant organisations in Phase 1 of the Special Sites Scheme, it is anticipated that about 7 500 RCHE places (including subsidised and non-subsidised places) could be provided subject to the smooth implementation of all the proposed projects relating to elderly services. The Government also launched a new phase of the Special Sites Scheme in April 2019. The SWD is discussing with the applicant organisations to finalise details of their proposals such as service type, number of places, development parameters and project cost, with a view to implementing the projects as soon as possible.

(2) and (3) The Government implemented in July 2003 a scheme to encourage provision of RCHE premises in new private developments (the Scheme). The Scheme provides that eligible RCHE premises will be exempted from payment of premium under different types of land transactions including lease modification, land exchange and private treaty grant, if the developers are willing to accept incorporation of certain lease conditions to ensure the provision of RCHE premises. Premium exemption will be granted with the support of relevant departments (including the SWD). The developers will have to bear the construction cost of the RCHE premises which, once built, will become the properties of the developers. The Government will allow the developers to lease, sell or operate the premises themselves or through agencies as long as the premises remain as RCHEs. The developers/ operators are free to set their own fees having regard to the market trend.

Since the implementation of the Scheme, one project in Tuen Mun has received premium exemption. Construction and furnishing of the RCHE premises have been completed, while the application for RCHE licence is in progress. The SWD has also received other preliminary proposals submitted by interested developers/ applicants referred by the Lands Department or the Planning Department. Whether the projects can be realised is subject to various considerations and factors to be taken into account by individual developers/ applicants in the course of land transaction.

(4) RCHEs are regulated under the Residential Care Homes (Elderly Persons) Regulation (the Regulation). According to section 20(1) of the Regulation, subject to section 20(2), no part of an RCHE shall be situated at a height more than 24 metres above the ground floor. This requirement is a safety

consideration for elderly residents as many of them are wheelchair-bound or even bed-ridden. In the event of fire or other emergencies, they need extensive assistance to evacuate. The difficulty of fire personnel and other rescue teams in evacuating a large number of frail elderly persons with mobility problems to the ground floor cannot be neglected. Therefore, stipulating a height restriction for RCHEs helps protecting the safety of elderly residents in the event of fire or other emergencies as well as effectively shortening the time for fire personnel to rescue or evacuate residents.

Currently, under section 20(2) of the Regulation, the Director of Social Welfare may, by notice in writing served on an operator, authorise that any part of such RCHE may be situated at a height more than 24 metres above the ground floor as may be indicated in the notice. In the past 10 years, the SWD has not received any applications made pursuant to the above provision.