

LCQ4: Public housing sewerage system

Following is a question by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (April 29):

Question:

Earlier on, several tenants of Hong Mei House of Cheung Hong Estate and Heng Tai House of Fu Heng Estate were infected with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 one after another, and the causes for their infection might be related to the improper modification of the ventilating pipes of the foul water stacks in public housing units and design problems of the sewerage systems. As the authorities have so far not yet implemented any large-scale inspection and repair programme for the sewerage systems of the various public housing estates, some public housing tenants are worried about being infected with the disease and an outbreak of the epidemic in the community. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has finished the inspection of the sewerage systems of the two aforesaid estates; of the number of units in respect of which follow-up works are needed; as the authorities have pointed out that the height difference between the rooftop parapets of adjacent units in Heng Tai House may be conducive to the occurrence of air turbulence in the re-entrant of top floors, and such air turbulence may bring the virus in the rooftop ventilating pipes of the foul water stacks into the residential units, whether the authorities have conducted relevant improvement works;

(2) whether the authorities will conduct inspections and repairs for the sewerage systems (including rooftop ventilating pipes) of all those public housing estates having the same block type (i.e. Trident blocks) as the aforesaid estates, and discuss with the owners' corporations of those Tenants Purchase Scheme (TPS) estates with Trident blocks to expeditiously conduct the relevant inspections and repairs;

(3) whether the authorities will consider conducting inspections and repairs expeditiously for the various components of the sewerage systems (including U-traps and ventilating pipes) in the common parts and within individual units of all public housing (including subsidised sale housing) estates/courts, so as to minimise public health risks; if so, of the details; if not, the measures in place to deal with the relevant health risks; and

(4) as some owners of TPS estates have pointed out that such estates are poorly repaired and maintained over the years because of unclear management and repair responsibilities, whether the authorities will take up more repair responsibilities for TPS estates and expedite the relevant repair works, so that health risks will not arise as a result of poor repair and maintenance of such estates?

Reply:

President,

In response to the hygiene risks arising from COVID-19, the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA) has established a mechanism to inspect the drainage system of the buildings of HA (including public rental housing (PRH) estates). When HA receives notification from the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) that there is a confirmed case in a PRH estate or Tenants Purchase Scheme (TPS) estate, HA will inspect the drainage system of all PRH units (including PRH units in TPS estates) that use the same soil pipe and vent pipe with the unit with a confirmed case and arrange repairs to the drain/vent pipe during the inspection as appropriate.

In terms of property management, all TPS estates are, same as other private properties in general, subject to the control of the Building Management Ordinance (BMO) (Cap. 344), relevant land leases and Deeds of Mutual Covenant (DMCs) regardless of the percentage of ownership shares held by HA. The day-to-day estate management matters are discussed and resolved at meetings of management committees or general meetings convened by Owners' Corporations (OCs) pursuant to the provisions of BMO and DMCs. At present, all TPS estates have already formed their OCs. The OCs and their appointed property management companies are obliged to fulfil their responsibilities in repairing common areas and facilities in accordance with the terms of DMCs, so as to maintain the facilities in good condition and with proper repair. As the owner of the unsold PRH units in TPS estates, HA will be responsible for the repair and maintenance of the fixtures and fittings in those units.

My reply to the questions raised by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung is as follows:

(1) Cheung Hong Estate is a PRH estate. HA has already followed the aforementioned mechanism and deployed staff proactively to inspect the 34 units that use the same soil pipe and vent pipe with the unit with confirmed case. Several tenants were found to have altered their water closet pans and/or vent pipes without prior approval. Inspection staff have already carried out repairs works to these drain/vent pipes at once during the inspection as appropriate.

Fu Heng Estate is a TPS estate. As per the request by the CHP and under the delegated authority from the Building Authority, the Independent Checking Unit (ICU) that works directly under the Office of the Permanent Secretary for Transport and Housing (Housing) has inspected 68 units that use the same soil pipe and vent pipe with the units with confirmed cases and their adjoining units at Heng Tai House, Fu Heng Estate (including 15 PRH units not yet sold by HA). Follow up actions on defective vent pipes are required for 51 units. ICU has issued statutory orders under the Buildings Ordinance (BO) to the owner(s) of 44 units which have not completed the rectification, requiring them to arrange qualified contractors to inspect and rectify the defects to comply with the requirements of the BO. So far, 25 units have completed the rectification. For the 15 unsold PRH units, the tenants of seven units have altered their water closet pans and/ or vent pipe without

consent. HA has completed the rectification works of six units. Rectification works of the remaining unit will be carried out within May 2020.

For the phenomenon of "wake effect" which might have occurred at Heng Tai House, Fu Heng Estate, the Government has set up an inter-departmental expert group to follow up. The expert group is still studying and following up the test results of the environmental samples collected at Heng Tai House earlier and other relevant information and environmental factors in order to find out all possible ways of the spread of the virus, and to make relevant recommendations for improvement.

(2) and (3) There is no design problem of the drainage system (including the vent pipes inside the toilets and at roof levels) in buildings of HA. These buildings were designed according to the Standard Block design adopted for public housing at the time of development, and met the construction standard, the relevant requirements, and the environmental, health and safety requirements at the time. However, hygiene risk may arise if the occupants alter the vent pipe in a toilet without obtaining prior approval from HA.

HA will proactively inspect the vent pipes at roof levels of PRH buildings and PRH units that use the same soil pipe and vent pipe with the unit with a confirmed case. For other PRH units, if tenants are concerned about the current condition of their drainage pipework or the hygienic risk arising from their alterations, they may seek assistance from the estate management office who will arrange inspection and follow-up as appropriate.

With no difference from private properties, proper maintenance to the drainage system is the owners' responsibilities for TPS estates. Regardless of the block design, an owner should not arbitrarily modify the drainage system or pipes of the building to deviate them from the original design and contravene the BO. Upon receipt of a relevant report, ICU will conduct site inspection. If alteration of drains which does not comply with the BO is found, ICU will request the owner(s) to rectify them according to the law.

(4) HA has provided a maintenance fund at a sum equivalent to \$14,000 per residential unit for each TPS estate on a one-off basis to meet the expenses of post-sale maintenance works. It is the obligation of the OCs/owners to maintain the common facilities in good condition and keep them in proper repair. If the OCs/owners suspect that their common facilities are not in good condition, or may pose a hygiene risk, they should arrange qualified contractors to inspect and repair the facilities as soon as possible. In case there is a need to repair common facilities in individual estates, HA, when necessary, will contribute the fund as required by law and in accordance with its management shares held to share the repair charges with other owners.