

LCQ8: Louvre enclosure works in public rental housing

Following is a question by the Hon Dominic Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Housing, Ms Winnie Ho, in the Legislative Council today (January 8):

Question:

It is learnt that some public rental housing (PRH) units in North East New Territories (NENT) are required to carry out enclosure works for corridor-facing louvres (enclosure works) in accordance with the Fire Safety (Buildings) Ordinance (Cap. 572). However, some affected residents are worried that the enclosure of louvres may lead to poor ventilation and insufficient lighting in their units, which may potentially affect elderly persons or residents with chronic diseases. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the following information about PRH estates in NENT which are affected by the enclosure works: name of the estates, number of buildings, number of units involved and whether there are issues of insufficient lighting or poor ventilation in the units concerned; whether the authorities have conducted additional assessment in the light of the environment and special needs of the district;

(2) whether the authorities will consider installing additional ventilation or lighting facilities, such as exhaust fans or fluorescent tubes, in PRH estates in NENT affected by the enclosure works, and introducing a special subsidy scheme to subsidize residents for carrying out improvement works; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether the authorities will, when carrying out the enclosure works, examine in tandem other problems involving structural safety or ageing facilities in the estates concerned, such as cracks on walls, ageing wires or water seepage through bay windows; if so, of the scope and progress of the examinations; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether the authorities will organize more community consultation sessions or forums for residents in NENT to enable residents affected by the enclosure works to have a clear understanding of the arrangements, impact and solutions relating to the works, and to receive residents' suggestions with a view to further enhancing the relevant measures; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Buildings Department (BD) and Hong Kong Fire Services Department (FSD), the consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Dominic Lee is set out below:

According to the Fire Safety (Buildings) Ordinance (Cap. 572) (the Ordinance), composite and domestic buildings constructed on or before March 1, 1987, or with the plans of the buildings works first submitted to the Building Authority for approval on or before that day (the target buildings) are required to upgrade the fire safety standards to meet modern fire protection requirements. Currently, under the Housing Authority, there are 477 public rental housing (PRH) blocks in 64 estates regulated by the Ordinance.

Since the Ordinance came into effect on July 1, 2007, the Housing Department (HD) has been in close liaison with the BD and FSD to formulate feasible fire safety improvement proposals and implementation details for the target buildings, including conducting assessments of the target buildings; appointing fire engineering consultants to study the works details as well as liaising with the BD and FSD on the vetting and acceptance processes, etc. The HD has been implementing the improvement works taking into account the difficulty and priority of the projects and basing on the acceptance progress of improvement proposals, scope of works and co-ordination with other maintenance programmes of the target buildings concerned. In fact, shortly after the Ordinance took effect, some improvement works which are comparatively easy to implement, such as replacement of fire doors and installation of emergency lighting systems, have commenced by phase. Considering the large number of target buildings with varying architectural layout and designs, the HD, BD and FSD have been in close liaison in conducting joint inspections to each target building by phase to determine the required scope of fire safety improvement works for each building. The HD also submitted fire safety improvement proposals based on the requirements and subsequently arranged the necessary improvement works at once upon receipt of the acceptance from the BD and FSD.

With regard to the louver enclosure works at the older PRH blocks, the fire engineering consultant pointed out that the domestic flats concerned are with louvers facing the internal corridor, which are not separated from the escape staircases. Therefore, in the event of fire accidents, the louvers of these flats could not resist fire and smoke, leading to proliferation of fire and smoke through the louvers to the internal corridor or other flats. Notwithstanding that some tenants had adopted different materials and methods to enclose the louvers on their own in the past years for privacy, sound insulation or security concerns, these materials or methods might not render effective fire resistance. The HD is aware that tenants may have different views on the louver enclosure works. Therefore, upon confirmation of the necessity of the enclosure works to enhance fire protection in 2018, the HD requested the fire engineering consultant to conduct an in-depth investigation to explore the feasibility of using various materials or methods to formulate the most suitable approach.

Our replies to the sub-questions are as follows:

(1) and (2) The louver enclosure works to be implemented by the HD in North East New Territories (NENT) involve 10 PRH estates, including Chun Shek Estate, Kwong Fuk Estate, Lek Yuen Estate, Lung Hang Estate, Mei Lam Estate, Sha Kok Estate, Sun Chui Estate, Sun Tin Wai Estate, Tai Yuen Estate and Wo Che Estate; covering a total of about 21 000 domestic flats in 35 blocks. After a thorough study on the feasibility and safety of the enclosure works, upon on-site inspections and multiple discussions with the BD and FSD, HD has decided to enclose the louver windows facing internal corridors with fire-resisting boards to enhance fire protection. As a matter of fact, sufficient natural lighting and ventilation has been provided for all relevant domestic flats through balconies and windows. Generally, works could be carried out outside domestic flats and tenants are not required to attend or bear any construction cost.

(3) The HD has been implementing different maintenance and improvement work programmes for all PRH estates continuously, such as the Comprehensive Structural Investigation Programme, the Estate Improvement Programme, the Total Maintenance Scheme, the Lift Modernisation and Responsive In-flat Maintenance Services, etc., to provide suitable building repair/maintenance, and upgrade estate facilities as well as the overall living environment.

(4) Before the commencement of louver enclosure works, in order to familiarise tenants with the arrangement and details, the HD will post notices and photos at the lift lobby on the ground floor and at the lobby on other floors of the PRH blocks concerned, display the mock-up of the louver enclosure in the estates, issue letters to affected tenants and briefly introduce relevant information in "Estate Newsletter". In addition, the HD will join hands with the BD and FSD to conduct briefing sessions on fire safety improvement works to introduce and explain to tenants the arrangements and details of the relevant works. In taking forward the relevant works in PRH estates in NENT in the future, the HD will also adopt the abovementioned measures as appropriate to publicise and explain the relevant arrangement to tenants.