

Office of The Ombudsman announces results of direct investigation into Housing Department's arrangements for Housing for Senior Citizens and converted one-person units (with photo)

The following is issued on behalf of the Office of The Ombudsman:

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (July 13) announced at a press conference the completion of a direct investigation into the arrangements for Housing for Senior Citizens (HSC) and converted one-person (C1P) units by the Housing Department (HD), and made eight recommendations for improvement to the HD.

In the 1980s, the HD introduced HSC to provide hostel-type public rental housing (PRH) for elderly tenants aged 60 or above. According to the design of units, there are three types of HSC, namely Type 1 (HS1), Type 2 (HS2) and Type 3 (HS3). C1P units were also provided in response to the society's demand for one-person PRH units at that time. In both types of units, tenants have to share such facilities as kitchen and/or bathroom.

The Office's investigation revealed that these units with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities have become outdated and unpopular. Despite multiple measures taken by the Hong Kong Housing Authority to improve their occupancy rates over nearly two decades, it has yet to recover all HS1 and C1P units which are no longer available for allocation. As at the end of March 2023, around 60 per cent of the partitioned rooms in these units were vacant. Since the HD has to wait for all the tenants to move out from a unit before converting it into an ordinary PRH flat, the vacancy periods of partitioned rooms are often long. Around 80 per cent of HS1 units and nearly 90 per cent of C1P units had partitioned rooms left vacant for 10 years or longer, with only one person residing in most of these units (involving around 370 units). Consequently, the progress of unit conversion is extremely slow, and the vacancy rates have remained high.

Meanwhile, the vacancy rates of HS2 and HS3 units, which are still available for allocation, were also high at around 15 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. Although the HD has included these units for general allocation as well as under the Express Flat Allocation Scheme (EFAS), more than 1 000 PRH applicants refused an offer involving HSC in each of the past five years. In 2021-22, 97 per cent of PRH applicants who had not joined EFAS but allocated HSC units rejected the offers, indicating that these units were highly unpopular. Some of these applicants felt aggrieved that refusing the offer is counted as forfeiting one chance of flat allocation. The

persistently high percentage of refused offers was unsatisfactory.

Ms Chiu said, "If the HD's arrangements remain unchanged, the occupancy rates of HSC and C1P units will hardly improve significantly. Given the problem of short-term shortage of public housing in Hong Kong, it is incumbent upon the HD to review the effectiveness of existing arrangements, consider breakthrough measures and make corresponding adjustments. While showing compassion and sympathy for the elderly tenants affected, the HD should also ensure more effective deployment of relevant PRH resources to meet the excess demand for public housing."

The Office's recommendations for improvement to the HD include:

- review whether HS2 and HS3 units should still be classified as ordinary PRH flats, and consider ceasing to allocate these units to general PRH applicants;
- consider tailoring a specific allocation scheme for HS2 and HS3, and drawing on the concept of transitional housing to allocate some of the vacant units of HS2/HS3 as short-term accommodation for people with urgent housing needs;
- review the effectiveness of the existing measures, and consider in the long run the needs for changing the use of HS2 and HS3; and
- promote and introduce more transfer incentives, proactively lobby and encourage the elderly and non-elderly tenants of HS1 and C1P units to transfer.

The HD is actively considering the improvement recommendations made by the Office.

The full investigation report is available on the website of the Office of The Ombudsman at www.ombudsman.hk for public information.

