

Government committed to helping drug treatment centres to comply with licensing requirements

The Government is committed to helping drug treatment and rehabilitation centres to comply with the requirements of the Licensing Scheme under the Drug Dependent Persons Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres (Licensing) Ordinance (the Ordinance) in order to maintain their existing services to the community.

The Acting Commissioner for Narcotics, Ms Mimi Lee said today (February 25), "In response to a report in an English language newspaper, I wish to clarify that the estimation that at least half of the drug treatment and rehabilitation centres may face closure as a result of re-zoning issues under the licensing scheme is grossly untrue."

Ms Lee said, "There is no hidden agenda. The objective of the licensing scheme under the Ordinance is to help existing centres to improve their services and upgrade their physical settings and enhance their safety standards. This is in part in recognition of the valuable services these drug treatment and rehabilitation centres are offering to drug dependent persons in Hong Kong. The spirit of the scheme is to help them continue to enhance their services," she said.

Ms Lee said, "According to a preliminary study completed by the Social Welfare Department in consultation with the Planning Department in July 2001, about ten centres may be required to approach the Lands Department and/or the Planning Department to ascertain if they are in contravention of the permitted condition of the relevant Government leases and the provisions of the relevant town plans.

"Of these, the majority of the centres were found not in breach of their existing land lease conditions. If these centres can prove that their existence predated the issuance of the relevant zoning plan, no action is required to make the existing use conform to the plan. However, some will have to apply for planning permission and such applications will be processed within two months. On existing information, only Glorious Praise Fellowship will need to apply for re-zoning permission.

"Much assistance has been rendered to Glorious Praise Fellowship since July 2001. The Social Welfare Department and Planning Department have already alerted Glorious Praise Fellowship of its need to apply for re-zoning, and have been helping

the agency in its application since then.

"The fact that Glorious Praise Fellowship is the existing user of the land will be taken into account when its re-zoning application is considered. It will also be given eight years following commencement of the Ordinance to comply with the statutory requirements," Ms Lee said.

Ms Lee said that the Government had pledged to assist in whatever way it could to help affected centres to comply with the licensing requirements. The Narcotics Division (ND) has rendered assistance in site search in the past and will continue to do so in consultation with relevant departments such as Lands Department and Government Property Agency. This pledge was clearly relayed to the legislature when the Bill was scrutinized by the Legislative Council.

Exemption period in meeting the licensing requirements of up to four years will be given to existing drug treatment and rehabilitation centres with Government subvention. For those centres without Government subvention, exemption period of up to eight years will be given.

Ms Lee said, "The granting of exemption period is an administrative measure. The Government will adopt a flexible approach in considering the extension of grace period for those agencies with demonstrated difficulties."

To help such centres undergo the necessary upgrading work to meet the licensing requirements as stipulated in the new Ordinance, ND has alerted the Lotteries Fund, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries Fund and other charitable organizations of the possible demand for financial assistance from these centres.

The Beat Drugs Fund has also set up a special funding scheme in January this year to help those drug treatment centres with demonstrated difficulties in seeking funding support from other Funds. Briefing sessions on the new funding scheme and the new statutory requirements were organized in January 2001. The Social Welfare Department has issued a Code of Practice to help centres' compliance with the new law.

The Drug InfoCentre located on 30th floor of the Queensway Government Offices also serves as a one-stop unit to provide information to the public on the licensing

requirements.

The Government has conducted numerous consultations on the Drug Dependent Persons Treatment and Rehabilitation centres (Licensing) Bill, including a six-month public consultation exercise, discussions at more than 20 meetings of the Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) and its Sub-committee on Treatment and Rehabilitation as well as the Drug Liaison Committee, meetings with relevant agencies and groups, and consultation with the Legislative Council Panel on Security and District Boards.

The Drug Dependent Persons Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres (Licensing) Bill was introduced into the Legislative Council on November 1, 2000. After more than a year's scrutiny in the LegCo Bills Committee, the Bill was passed on April 25, 2001. The new legislation is scheduled to take effect from April 1 this year. Ms Lee said the claim that Christian Zheng Sheng Association had requested the Government for resources to improve the environment of its centre since 1996 but to no avail was also misleading.

She said, "Zheng Sheng has asked the Government to assist in identifying a site for establishing a half-way house for drug dependent persons, building a pier, providing toilets and refuse collection point and so on since 1996. Much assistance had been rendered to the association and its requests were met in 1996 and 1997.

"In 1996, Zheng Sheng also asked for a site to relocate its treatment centre in Kam Tin. Concerned departments have followed up the case. Since we understood in 1997 that the lease of the site in Kam Tin had been renewed, Zheng Sheng has not sought further assistance from the Government for relocation.

"The agency has recently renewed its request and we have already assisted Zheng Sheng in site search. In fact, five sites have already been identified for this purpose," she added.

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