

Information Paper for the Legislative Council Panel on Housing

Bedspace apartments and related issues

PURPOSE

This paper provides the Administration's response to the two reports submitted by the Legislative Council Secretariat about bedspace apartments and private dwellings, and other related issues raised by Members earlier.

BACKGROUND

2. At its meeting of 5 July 1999, Members discussed and expressed views on the reports prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat, namely, "Housing Standards of Private Dwellings" and "Bedspace Apartment: Public views on the effectiveness of current regulating measures and related issues and Government's response". Members agreed that the subject should be further discussed at the new Legislative Council session. To facilitate the discussion, Members requested the Administration to respond to issues which were of particular concern to Members.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S RESPONSE TO THE REPORTS OF THE LEGCO SECRETARIAT

A. Enforcement of the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance

- Q1. When will the outcome of the current survey of unlicensed bedspace apartments be available?
- A1. As advised by Secretary for Home Affairs (SHA), the Home Affairs Department (HAD) conducted an exercise in early 1999 with a view to identifying possible illegal operation of Bedspace Apartments (BSAs). Staff of the Office of the Licensing Authority (LA) identified 3,190 private residential units in the exercise and was able to gain access to 2,972 units. These residential units were identified through a number of channels including Social Welfare Department (SWD), District Offices, mutual aid committees, owners' corporations as well as other non-governmental organisations which had been involved in providing assistance to BSA lodgers. Other sources included complaints from the public received by the LA and street advertisements on suspected BSAs for rental. Out of the 2,972 units visited, nine premises were

suspected to involve illegal BSA operation. LA has since been following up these nine cases. So far, three of them have ceased to operate as BSAs. Warning letters have been issued to the remaining six premises. Should the concerned operators refuse to carry out the upgrading works to fulfill the safety requirements and to apply for licences, LA will consider taking enforcement action against the premises. HAD will liaise with SWD and Housing Department (HD) in providing rehousing arrangements to the affected lodgers where appropriate.

Q2. What is the updated number of registered and licensed bedspace apartments and the assistance that the Administration will render to the unlicensed bedspace apartments to fulfil the licensing requirements as well as the measures to be taken if the existing registered bedspace apartments are not able to meet the required standard?

A2. As advised by SHA, there were 51 licensed bedspace apartments accommodating some 1,000 lodgers as at 1 December 1999. Staff of the LA will conduct visits to all licensed bedspace apartments to regulate the fire and building safety of the premises. Should these bedspace apartments fail to meet the requisite safety standards and/or the operators choose to cease operation, staff of District Offices and the SWD will conduct visits to offer rehousing assistance to the displaced lodgers as appropriate.

Q3. How far could cubicle apartments be brought under the regulation of the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance ?

A3. The Bedspace Apartments Ordinance under the policy purview of Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) provides for a statutory licensing scheme to regulate the fire and building safety of bedspace apartments with 12 or more individual bedspaces for rent. Units/rooms in “cubicle apartments” are generally outside the statutory purview of the Ordinance.

B. Rehousing arrangements

Q4. How many licensed bedspace apartments are expected to close down at the recent renewal exercise ?

A4. As advised by SHA, 13 privately operated bedspace apartments previously issued with conditional licenses have ceased operating as bedspace apartments.

- Q5. How many BSA residents are expected to be displaced as a result of (Q4) above? How many of them will be housed in the singleton hostels run by HAD ?
- A5. As advised by SHA, 157 lodgers have been affected. Among them, 10 have moved into singleton hostels run by HAD; 16 have been rehoused through SWD's compassionate rehousing scheme; and one application is being processed for compassionate rehousing. The remaining 130 have chosen to arrange accommodation by themselves.
- Q6. Will the singleton hostels be open to those currently living in licensed bedspace apartments, unlicensed bedspace apartments and cubicle apartments ?
- A6. As advised by SHA, the present policy is that only lodgers displaced as a result of the implementation of the Bedspace Apartment Ordinance will be admitted. Those currently living in "cubicle apartments" are not admitted.
- Q7. In what manner will the Government promote the image of the singleton hostels with a view to enhancing their utilisation rate ?
- A7. As advised by SHA, the HAD, in collaboration with the two non-government agencies managing singleton hostels, has initiated the following measures to enhance the attractiveness of the singleton hostels as follows:
- (a) The Salvation Army and the Agency for Volunteer Service, together with the respective management agency for Sunrise House and the 33 singleton hostels converted from private premises, are organising visits to bedspace apartments which face imminent danger of closure (e.g. bedspace apartments whose conditional license would not be reviewed) to encourage the affected lodgers to apply for admission into HAD's singleton hostels. The interested lodgers will be invited to visit the hostels to have first hand experience of the hostel environment.
 - (b) Both management agencies are in close liaison with social workers to offer assistance to bedspace apartment lodgers on hostels application procedures and to clarify any queries about the house rules, as well as to disseminate information

about recent improvements in the living environment of the hostels.

- (c) Both management agencies will organise open days for prospective applicants to familiarise them with the hostel facilities and environment and to clarify any misunderstanding of hostel house rules.
- (d) HAD is assisting in putting up banners and posters in areas where bedspace apartments are located, in order to publicise the singleton hostel programme.

C. Housing needs of singletons

- Q8. Has any survey been carried out on the long-term housing needs of the single persons requiring social rehabilitation? Whether the current arrangements, including the temporary shelters and institutions, are able to meet the needs of these residents given the eligibility criteria for admission to these institutions, the limit of the period of stay, etc.?
- A8. The Housing Bureau has recently completed a review of housing assistance for singletons in general. Besides this, the Administration has not carried out any survey specifically on the housing needs of single persons requiring social rehabilitation.
- Q9. Given that the average waiting time for single-person public rental housing (PRH) flats is nine years, whether the Administration will consider providing rent subsidies to single persons on the Waiting List (WL) to improve their living environment before they are allocated PRH ?
- A9. There is, at present, no plan to implement the proposal of providing rent subsidies to single persons on the WL. Instead, we will provide some additional 6,000 public rental flats to single persons, with a view to reducing their average waiting time for PRH gradually to three years by 2005, in line with all other households.
- Q10. Whether the production of single-person PRH flats is measured against the housing needs of singletons eligible for PRH ? Whether there is any intention to convert the factory buildings of the Housing Authority into singleton PRH units ?

A10. Flat mix of public housing projects has been kept under regular review to ensure that the supply matches with the demand of the target groups. The HD is examining the redevelopment potential of flatted factories, most of which are in urban prime sites. The future use of these sites will be determined on individual merits.

Q11. When will the comprehensive review on the needs of non-elderly single persons for PRH flats, subsidised home ownership flats and housing loans be available ?

A11. As set out in the 1999 Policy Address, the review was completed on schedule. We are implementing the recommendations of the review. Briefly, we will provide additional PRH flats to single persons to shorten their average waiting time to three years by 2005, and will open up the Home Ownership Scheme, the Private Sector Participation Scheme, the Flats for Sale Scheme, the Home Purchase Loan Scheme and the Home Starter Loan Scheme to single persons.

D. Other issues

Q12. What is the impact of the implementation of further legislative measures to regulate living space and/or housing fitness, in particular, on the demand for PRH and the pledge of waiting time for PRH ?

A12. Without knowing the details of the said legislative measures, the number of households to be affected and the rehousing arrangement, it would be difficult to quantify the impact on the demand and the waiting time for PRH.

In any event, the Administration is committed to meeting the housing needs of those in genuine need by reducing their average waiting time for PRH to three years by 2005.

RESPONSE TO CONCERNS RAISED BY MEMBERS AT THE LEGCO PANEL ON HOUSING MEETING ON 5 JULY 1999

1. Members' Concern

To check and report to the Panel the number of bedspace apartments which have been converted to "cubicle apartments" with a view to

obviating the need to comply with the requirements under the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance.

Administration's Response

As advised by SHA, the Government has no information on the number of bedspace apartments which have been converted to "cubicle apartments" to obviate the need to comply with the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance.

2. Members' Concern

To respond to the paper prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat, namely, the research report on "Housing Standards of Private Dwellings".

Administration's Response

The report has revealed that there is no law in Taiwan, Japan and Singapore governing the minimum living space in private dwellings, though such legislation exists in the United Kingdom. Understandably, it is difficult to compare the housing standards in private dwellings in different countries given different social and economic conditions. As far as housing fitness standards are concerned, Director of Buildings has advised that the current Buildings Regulations are directed at ensuring the minimum standards. Those shown in page 7 of the research report are mostly enshrined in the Buildings Ordinance. The Buildings (Planning) Regulations and Buildings (Standards of Sanitary Figments, Plumbing, Drainage Works and Latrines) Regulations set out the respective standards of the means of lighting and ventilation, fire escapes and sanitary facilities etc. These standards have to be compiled with by different types of premises, including domestic buildings. The Regulations, however, do not have any control over the maximum population density of inhabitants in private domestic dwellings, which are indeed difficult, if not impossible, to enforce.

3. Members' Concern

To respond to the paper prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat, namely, the research report on "Public views on the effectiveness of current regulating measures and related issues and Government's response".

Administration's Response

As advised by SHA, paragraphs 4 to 31 of the research report have already set out the Administration's response to the four deputations on the existing legislative measures for bedspace apartments.

4. Members' Concern

To respond to the proposal of “promoting the attractiveness of Home Affairs Department (HAD)’s singleton hostels so as to encourage more bedspace apartment lodgers to move to these hostels”.

Administration's Response

Please see the Administration's response in A7 above.

5. Members' Concern

To respond to the proposal of “assessing the demand for single-person PRH and incorporating the information for the purpose of the overall planning of PRH”.

Administration's Response

We have completed a review of housing demand of single persons. The Housing Authority will supply some additional 6,000 small self-contained flats and take other positive measures, with a view to reducing the average waiting of single persons to three years by 2005.

6. Members' Concern

To respond to the proposal of “assessing the needs of those living in “cubicle apartments” and taking the information into account when reviewing the eligibility criteria for PRH”.

Administration's Response

It has always been the Government's policy of providing affordable housing to people in genuine need. The Housing Authority has regularly reviewed the eligibility criteria for PRH to ensure fair and rational allocation of public housing resources. Meanwhile, the HD would, from time to time, visit “cubicle apartments” lodgers to encourage eligible households to register on the Waiting List.

7. Members' Concern

To respond to the proposal of “enhancing the coordination of different bureaux and departments involved in the work relating to bedspace apartments (i.e. HAB, Housing Bureau, SWD, HD and HAD) to address

the housing needs of those who have no choice but to reside in bedspace apartments or “cubicle apartments”.

Administration’s Response

The bedspace apartment lodgers and lodgers of “cubicle apartments” may apply for PRH through Waiting List. As their housing needs are no different from those who are inadequately accommodated, which are now properly addressed by the Waiting List, there is no need to set up an inter-departmental working group to address specifically their housing needs.

8. Members’ Concern

To examine the impact if further legislative measure to regulate living space and/or housing fitness is to be introduced in Hong Kong.

Administration’s Response

Please see A 12 above.

Housing Bureau
Government Secretariat
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