

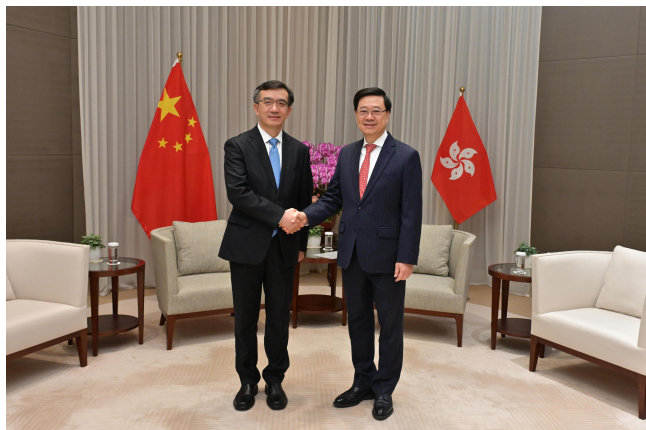
CE meets Governor of Qinghai Province (with photo)

The Chief Executive, Mr John Lee, met the Governor of Qinghai Province, Mr Luo Dongchuan, today (February 20) to exchange views on deepening co-operation between Hong Kong and Qinghai. Also attending the meeting were the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Erick Tsang Kwok-wai, and the Director of the Chief Executive's Office, Ms Carol Yip.

Mr Lee welcomed Mr Luo and his delegation to Hong Kong to attend and officiate at a conference promoting Qinghai-Hong Kong economic and trade exchanges and co-operation. Mr Lee noted that the economic and trade relations between Hong Kong and Qinghai have long been close, with Hong Kong being the largest source of external investment for Qinghai. As of the end of 2023, the cumulative number of Hong Kong enterprises established in Qinghai had exceeded 340. Hong Kong will continue to leverage its advantage of connecting the Mainland and the world, and work with Qinghai to achieve complementarity and mutual benefits, jointly contributing to the country's high-quality development.

Mr Lee said that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government attaches importance to youth development. It encourages and supports Hong Kong youth to visit the Mainland for exchanges and internships to enhance their understanding of national development. In July last year, more than 100 young people from Hong Kong visited Xining in Qinghai Province for an exchange programme. He thanked the Qinghai Provincial Government for its emphasis on and support for the event, and looked forward to more youth exchange projects to promote mutual friendship and broaden the horizons of young people from the two places.

With Xining in Qinghai Province being included as one of the applicable cities of the Individual Visit Scheme, and the resumption of direct flights between Xining and Hong Kong, Mr Lee said that people-to-people exchanges between Hong Kong and Qinghai will be further promoted. Hong Kong will continue to deepen its exchanges and co-operation with Qinghai in such areas as the economy and trade, cultural tourism, and youth development, with a view to making greater contributions to national development.



Government welcomes passage of Road Tunnels (Government) (Amendment) Bill 2024

The Government welcomed the passage of the Road Tunnels (Government) (Amendment) Bill 2024 by the Legislative Council today (February 20), which lays the foundation for the Government to smoothly take over the Tai Lam Tunnel (TLT) and implement new tolls at a suitably reduced level.

The Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Ms Mable Chan, said, "The TLT is vital to the well-being of the 1 million residents in Yuen Long and North Districts who travel through the Tunnel, as well as being the lifeblood of transport and logistics trades to the road-based land crossings, airport, cargo terminals, etc. The Bill seeks to make the TLT, which is an important land infrastructure, more accessible and convenient for the public. The new tolls, which are devised based on scientific and traffic data, will enable the flow of people and freight between the Northwest New Territories and the urban area. The new tolls are a comprehensive proposal that takes into account both public opinion and holistic policy considerations."

The Government has appropriately reduced the tolls of the TLT to achieve a number of policy objectives: ensure that the TLT remains smooth and its spare capacity is utilised to alleviate the heavy traffic on its alternative routes (i.e. Tuen Mun Road and Tolo Highway); ensure smooth public transport services through the tunnel, thereby enabling the public's commuting; embody the principle of "efficiency first" to attract commercial vehicles to use the Tunnel in support of the operation and development of the logistics industry; and the adherence to the principles of "user pay" and "cost-recovery".

The Government will implement a time-varying toll at the TLT. The tolls for all types of vehicles will be substantially reduced from the current levels, i.e. the toll for private cars is between \$18 and \$45; the toll for motorcycles (including motor tricycles) is between \$7.2 and \$18; the toll for

taxi is charged at an all-day fixed rate of \$28, while other commercial vehicles including goods vehicles and buses are charged an all-day fixed toll of \$43. The above tolls will come into force on May 31 this year when the Government takes over the TLT. The HKeToll will also be implemented at the TLT, and the Transport Department will announce the details in due course.

[Housing Department's response to Ombudsman's direct investigation report](#)

Regarding a report released by the Office of the Ombudsman today (February 20) on its direct investigation into "Arrangements for Recovering Public Rental Housing Flats by Authorities", the Housing Department (HD) thanked the Ombudsman for appreciating the initiative of the Housing Authority (HA)/HD in the work of recovering public rental housing (PRH) flats and proactively taking enhanced measures in respect of the procedures of flat recovery, refurbishment and allocation process of PRH units for expediting early intake of PRH by prospective tenants.

The HA/HD attaches great importance to the procedures and arrangements for the recovery of PRH flats, as well as the refurbishment and allocation processes, with a view to streamlining the workflow and expediting the allocation process and the turnover of PRH units. In this regard, the HA/HD has previously launched a series of reviews to explore and implement optimisation measures, including making advance allocation of vacant flats undergoing refurbishment to eligible PRH applicants simultaneously, so that PRH applicants can immediately move in once the refurbishment works are completed; and expanding the scope of the Vacant Flat Refurbishment Allowance to vacant flats of all building ages in November 2024. Prospective tenants who choose to participate in the scheme will receive an allowance equivalent to a standard three-month rent and can use the relevant allowance flexibly to make arrangements that better suit their families' needs.

In addition, as the HA has intensified its efforts to combat the abuse of PRH flats, the number of hearing cases has increased accordingly. To speed up the handling of appeal cases, the Appeal Panel (Housing) has streamlined the handling procedures and increased the number of hearings since mid-2022, including simplifying the process of verifying the identity of the appellant and increasing the number of hearing sessions on weekday evenings and Saturday mornings; starting from 2023/24, the number of Appeal Panel members has also significantly increased by nearly 20 per cent from about 100 in the past to 120. The average time from receipt of an appeal to reaching a decision has been sharply shortened from four months in 2022 to 2.5 months in 2023. The time in the first half of 2024 has been further reduced to less

than two months.

"Regarding the direct investigation report initiated by the Ombudsman, we thank the Ombudsman for the affirmation and recognition of our present works, and we appreciate its valuable views on our current mechanisms and measures. We will review and study the relevant recommendations in detail and continue to seriously handle and review the recovery of PRH units, refurbishment and allocation processes of PRH from time to time, and allocate the PRH units to those in need as soon as possible," an HD spokesman said.

Ombudsman announces results of direct investigation operation into Government's arrangements for recovery, refurbishment and reallocation of public rental housing flats (with photos)

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

The Ombudsman, Mr Jack Chan, today (February 20) announced the completion of a direct investigation operation into the Government's arrangements for the recovery, refurbishment and reallocation of public rental housing (PRH) flats, and has made 19 major recommendations for improvements to the Housing Department (HD) and the Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS).

The current-term Government has been making every effort to increase the PRH supply, and its efforts are delivering tangible results. In addition, the HD and the HKHS recover a number of PRH flats each year for various reasons such as tenants purchasing private flats in the market or subsidised sale flats, moving into residential care homes, passing away or voluntarily surrendering their flat for other reasons. In the past five years (note), the HD and the HKHS have recovered 15 700 and 1 100 PRH flats respectively on average each year. Efficient recovery and refurbishment of PRH flats is essential to speed up the reallocation of flats, thereby shortening the waiting time for public housing.

Mr Chan said, "The current-term Government has diligently identified sites and built housing estates to solve the pressing housing problem. It endeavours to enhance quantity, speed, efficiency and quality, and adopts a proactive and positive attitude in enhancing the sense of happiness of the

public. In combating abuse of public housing, the Government has spared no effort and implemented enhancement measures. Its efforts are delivering tangible results.

"Subsequent to the launch of our direct investigation operation, the HD proactively introduced several enhancement measures to expedite the process of refurbishing recovered flats for reallocation to PRH applicants. Starting from November 2024, relevant measures have been put into practice in phases. For instance, the HD has set up a mechanism to provide contractors with information about the housing estates where there will be vacant flats in advance so that the contractors can make prior arrangements for the materials and manpower required for refurbishment works. The Department will also request that contractors give priority to refurbishment of vacant flats accepted by prospective tenants. It has also revised its Vacant Flat Refurbishment Allowance Scheme to extend the coverage to all vacant units regardless of the age of the property so that those who choose to join the scheme can move in as soon as possible. We consider such efforts of the HD laudable. In our view, the HD and the HKHS should take further steps forward to make reforms in recovery, refurbishment and reallocation arrangements to achieve a quicker turnover of PRH flats and ensure optimal utilisation of precious public housing resources."

The Office of The Ombudsman (the Office) has made 19 recommendations for improvements to the HD and the HKHS regarding exploring improvement of workflows to speeding up recovery of PRH flats, improving the procedures for handling items left in PRH flats by previous tenants, enhancing arrangements for refurbishment and reallocation of PRH flats, and reviewing relevant measures. The Office is pleased to learn that the HD and the HKHS have generally accepted all the Ombudsman's recommendations for improvement.

The Ombudsman's major recommendations for improvement to the HD are:

- improve the procedures for recovering the flats of deceased singleton tenants and revise the relevant guidelines;
- strengthen staff training on recovery of flats of deceased singleton tenants to enhance staff's understanding of the revised workflow;
- explore how the procedures for handling cases involving tenants' failure to vacate and surrender their flat upon expiry of the deadline prescribed in the Notice-to-Quit can be improved;
- maintain close communication with members of the Appeal Panel (Housing) and give due consideration to various proposals for improvement to facilitate the smooth decision-making process of the Appeal Tribunal;
- explore the setting of targets for reallocation arrangements after recovery of PRH flats where feasible;
- enhance the computer system to add functions of data collection, statistics compilation and analysis to improve the efficiency of refurbishment and reallocation of recovered PRH flats; and
- improve communication with tenants and their emergency contact persons, requesting that tenants provide an email address to facilitate communication.

The major recommendations for improvement made to the HKHS are:

- make reference to the HD's procedures for recovering the flats of deceased singleton tenants and revise the relevant guidelines;
- arrange staff training after revising the guidelines on handling the tenancy matters of deceased singleton tenants;
- re-examine the procedures for handling items left in PRH flats by previous tenants;
- to be more proactive and decisive in handling cases of failure to surrender PRH flats;
- explore appropriate revisions of relevant arrangements to shorten the time frame for issuance of refurbishment work orders after recovery of a flat to less than 14 days to enhance efficiency and create a monitoring mechanism;
- re-examine the process of reallocation of recovered flats and explore setting of targets for reallocation arrangements after recovery of PRH flats where feasible;
- improve the computer system for statistical analysis to effectively collate information on refurbishments and reallocations of recovered PRH flats for better efficiency;
- review the workflow and standards of refurbishment works of vacant PRH flats to speed up work progress and shorten the refurbishment period;
- consider introducing a scheme similar to the HD's Vacant Flat Refurbishment Allowance Scheme and study the feasibility;
- consider following the HD's example in issuing a Letter of Assurance to offer PRH accommodation to tenants who surrender their flat due to admission to residential care homes or imprisonment, when they have housing needs in future;
- re-examine the arrangements for tenants' surrender of their PRH flats after acquiring other forms of subsidised housing; and
- request that tenants and their emergency contact persons provide an email address to facilitate communication.

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

Note: HD uses a financial year while HKHS uses a calendar year in compilation of statistics.



Postal services to Côte d'Ivoire return to normal

Hongkong Post announced today (February 20) that, as advised by the postal administration of Côte d'Ivoire, mail delivery services previously impacted by a local strike have returned to normal.