

# 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.