

LCQ1: Conservation of the stilt houses at Tai O

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Che-cheung and a reply by the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, in the Legislative Council today (May 22):

Question:

The scale of the stilt houses at Tai O has become very small as a result of natural ageing and repeated damages caused by typhoons, rainstorms and fires, and the stringent control on the refurbishment and reconstruction of the stilt houses under the prevailing squatter control policy and Government Land Licences. Some members of the public have pointed out that the stilt houses are described on the website of the Hong Kong Tourism Board as an iconic feature of the fishermen's village in Tai O and one of the most unique scenic spots in Hong Kong. The Government should therefore regard the stilt houses as cultural heritage and conserve them properly, instead of regulating the stilt houses as squatters. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will turn a blind eye to the disappearance of the stilt houses at Tai O through natural wastage; if not, whether it will formulate a new policy on the control and conservation of the stilt houses; if it will, of the objectives, details and implementation timetable of the new policy;

(2) whether it will change the stipulation that the stilt houses at Tai O may be succeeded to only by immediate family members, so as to facilitate the succession and preservation of the stilt houses; and

(3) whether it will take measures to improve the various systems of the stilt houses at Tai O concerning fire safety, water supply, sewage, electricity supply, public lighting, external access walkways, etc.; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Currently, the stilt houses situated along the waterway of the Tai Oi Creek are mainly structures under Government Land Licences (hereinafter referred to as licensed structures) and surveyed squatter structures covered in the 1982 Squatter Control Survey (hereinafter referred to as surveyed squatter structures).

I would like to first briefly explain the background of the Government's policies on licensed structures and surveyed squatter structures.

Government Land Licence (GLL) is land instrument issued by the

Government in or before the 1970s mainly to regularise unauthorised structures erected on government land in rural areas at the time. Such licensed structures are tolerated on a temporary basis if they comply with the licence requirements, until they have to be cleared for development, environmental improvement or safety reasons, or phased out due to "natural wastage". "Natural wastage" generally refers to the situation where a licensee is deceased and the licence is not succeeded by an immediate family member.

Separately, the Government conducted a territory-wide Squatter Control Survey (SCS) in 1982 to record the locations, dimensions, building materials and uses of the unauthorised structures erected on government land and leased agricultural land at that time. Such records formed the basis for squatter control. If these structures are in accord with the records of the 1982 SCS, generally they are "tolerated" on a temporary basis until they have to be cleared for development, environmental improvement or safety reasons. For surveyed squatter structures, "natural wastage" generally refers to the situation where a structure is no longer occupied and has its squatter survey number cancelled.

Given that these structures were not erected in accordance with the relevant statutes and regulations, they are likely to be less than satisfactory in various aspects including structural, density, fire safety specifications, ventilation and hygiene standards. The purpose of the aforesaid policies on licensed structures and surveyed squatter structures is to freeze and gradually reduce the number of unauthorised structures in the society.

Having consulted the relevant departments, my reply to the three-part question is as follows:

(1) As far as stilt houses in Tai O are concerned, cases of cancellation of relevant GLL or squatter survey number due to "natural wastage" have not happened in the past two years.

The aforesaid policies on licensed structures and surveyed squatter structures are applicable to the entire Hong Kong. As regards conservation of stilt houses in Tai O, we believe the recently proposed \$1 billion Lantau Conservation Fund may bring about a new opportunity to the community. In view of the traits of Tai O stilt houses, the Government plans to explore in future whether the proposed Lantau Conservation Fund can be tapped to enable stilt houses returned to the Government to be used for purposes benefiting the community instead of being demolished. For instance, subject to local situation and views, those stilt structures which originally will be demolished may be handed to non-governmental organisations for revitalisation and management through an appropriate mechanism to facilitate culture conservation and community support. The Government is considering such possibility.

As for licensed structures or surveyed squatter structures that are still being occupied, the licensees or occupants may apply for rebuilding or repairing the licensed structures or surveyed squatter structures concerned

in accordance with the relevant policies. The Government will consider the applications in a reasonable manner.

(2) Under the prevailing policies, if the licensee of a GLL passes away, generally only an immediate family member of his or her may apply for succession of the GLL. For surveyed squatter structures, the Government does not control the identity of the occupants. Such structures may be "tolerated" on a temporary basis if they accord with the 1982 SCS record.

In respect of transfer, conditions of licensed structures stipulate that GLLs are not transferable, whereas surveyed squatter structures has no legal interest in land at all. As the purpose of the policies is to gradually reduce and prevent persistence of unauthorised structures which do not comply with relevant requirement and safety standards in the society, the Government does not plan to change the existing arrangement. If the Government were to permit lawful transfer of such structures, there would be far-reaching implications on the society.

(3) Government departments have been pressing ahead with various improvement works for the Tai O area and its stilt houses. On fire services, currently the two fire stations in Tai O have already made special firefighting arrangements to cater for the village paths and stilt houses in Tai O, and especially installed a number of "firefighting toolboxes" along the walkways near the stilt houses in Tai O. The Fire Services Department also regularly arranges fire safety talks and fire drills for local residents.

On water supply, the stilt houses in Tai O are provided with adequate potable water supply. The Water Services Department also plans to assist the stilt house residents in replacing the pipelines along the public walkways to enhance reliability of water supply in the area.

On sewerage, the Government has already drawn up a plan to improve Tai O's underground public sewerage network. The Government will extend the public sewer to the government land nearest to the stilt house areas and reserve space for terminal manholes to facilitate residents' sewer connection.

On electricity supply, CLP Power Hong Kong Limited regularly inspects the electricity supply facilities in the area and will also maintain contact with the residents to ensure stability and safety of electricity supply.

The Highways Department and the Lands Department have been undertaking repairs and maintenance for public lighting systems in the area. The Islands District Office also plans to install lights at public walkways in some stilt house areas in the second half of this year.

The Civil Engineering and Development Department is currently implementing the improvement works at Tai O in phases. Phase 1 of the project was completed in March 2013, comprising mainly the construction of a riverwall at Yat Chung and the associated drainage and sewerage improvement works to alleviate risk of flooding. Phase 2 Stage 1 of the project is

currently under way, and the detailed design of Phase 2 Stage 2, which involves construction of two footbridges, will soon be carried out.

President, the relevant government departments would continue to review from time to time Tai O residents' needs for various kinds of social services, and make appropriate arrangements and improvements having regard to the needs of the area. Thank you, President.