

LCQ18: Problem of water dripping from air-conditioners

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (September 29):

Question:

Regarding the problem of water dripping from air-conditioners, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the following figures on the complaints about water dripping from air-conditioners received, and the law enforcement actions taken on the matter, in each of the past three years and since January this year by the 19 District Environmental Hygiene Offices (DEHO) under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) respectively:

- (i) the number of complaints received;
 - (ii) the number of cases identified through proactive inspections;
 - (iii) the number of nuisance notices issued;
 - (iv) the number of applications for nuisance orders made to the court; and
 - (v) the number of prosecutions instituted as well as the average amount of fine imposed on the convicted persons;
- (2) of a breakdown of the figures mentioned in (1) by type of housing (namely public rental housing, subsidised sale housing and private housing);
- (3) of the following information relating to the handling of the problem of water dripping from air-conditioners by FEHD in each of the past three years and since January this year (set out by DEHO):

- (i) the staffing establishment for handling water dripping from air-conditioners;
 - (ii) in respect of the completed cases, the average, longest and shortest time taken to (a) investigate and (b) reply to complainants; and
 - (iii) the average number of days between inspections conducted for the same street or same building;
- (4) of the following information relating to the "Scheme of Participation by Property Management Agents in Tackling Dripping Air-conditioners" in each of the past three years and since January this year:

(i) the number and percentage of property management agents participating in the Scheme;

(ii) the number and percentage of estates participating in the Scheme;

(iii) whether it knows, among the relevant complaints for the participating estates, the respective percentages of those cases in which the water dripping problem was (a) resolved and (b) referred to FEHD for follow-up actions; and

(iv) whether it has evaluated the effectiveness of the Scheme in helping to resolve the problem of water dripping from air-conditioners in the estates concerned; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) as the Government has advised that there are difficulties inherent in handling complaints about water dripping from air-conditioners (e.g. (i) difficulties in ascertaining the source of water dripping in dim light environment, and (ii) there may be multiple sources of water dripping because air-conditioners are installed vertically at the same location on each floor of high-rise multi-storey buildings), whether the Government will apply advanced technologies for resolving those difficulties; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(6) as the Government indicated in 2015 that it would review the practice of recruiting extra contract staff in summer to support frontline staff in handling the problem of water dripping from air-conditioners, and that it would, subject to the availability of resources, consider setting up dedicated teams to focus mainly on handling more complicated complaints in various districts, of (i) the review outcome and (ii) the number of dedicated teams and staffing establishment in each of the past three years and since January this year?

Reply:

President,

Upon receipt of a complaint from the public about dripping air-conditioner or notice of such a nuisance during its routine inspection, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) will conduct site inspections. In most cases, upon issuance of verbal warning or advisory letter by FEHD staff, the flat owners or occupants concerned will take necessary action to rectify the problem of water dripping from air-conditioners. If the problem persists, the FEHD will issue, in accordance with the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132), a Nuisance Notice to require the relevant person to abate the nuisance within the specified period. A person who fails to comply may be prosecuted, and is liable to a maximum penalty of a fine of \$10,000, as well as a daily fine of \$200 as long as the nuisance continues. If the nuisance has not yet been abated upon the conviction of the accused, the FEHD will apply to the court for a Nuisance Order to require compliance within the specified period. Any

person who fails without reasonable excuse to comply with the requirements stated in a Nuisance Order shall be guilty of an offence, and is liable to a maximum penalty of a fine of \$25,000, as well as a daily fine of \$450 as long as the nuisance continues.

Regarding the question raised by the Hon Chan Hak-kan, my reply is as follows:

(1) and (2) The number of complaints received by the FEHD and cases identified through the FEHD's proactive inspections, as well as other required information about water dripping from air-conditioners from 2018 to 2021 (up to July 31, 2021), broken down by the 19 District Environmental Hygiene Offices (DEHOs) and by type of housing, are set out in Annex 1 and Annex 2 respectively.

(3)(i) Health Inspectors are deployed by the FEHD to the 19 DEHOs across the territory to undertake various environmental hygiene duties, including handling complaints about water dripping from air-conditioners. In 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21, the staff establishment of Health Inspectors in the DEHOs totalled 328. The number increased to 337 in 2021-22. The details of the staff establishment are set out in Annex 3.

As the cases of nuisance caused by dripping air-conditioners mainly occur in the summer months, the FEHD has recruited contract staff to cope with the substantial increase in workload. Dedicated teams were set up to step up the inspection, advisory and education work on buildings where the dripping problem is serious and to take law enforcement actions. The number of contract posts has increased from 40 to 45 over the past three years. The details of the related staff establishment are set out in Annex 4.

(ii) and (iii) Upon receipt of a complaint from the public about dripping air-conditioner, the FEHD staff will usually conduct an investigation within six working days and give an interim reply to the complainant within 10 days. Excluding cases with investigation to be re-opened before the next summer due to the approach of cool weather, the average time taken for completed cases (those received and completed in the same year) over the past three years are set out in Annex 5. Besides, staff will be deployed to conduct ad hoc inspections in various locations, especially black spots of dripping air-conditioners with heavy pedestrian flow (such as roadside bus stops, public light bus stands and pedestrian crossings), during different times of the day including the early morning and evening hours. The FEHD does not maintain the other breakdown figures mentioned in the question.

(4) The Scheme of Participation by Property Management Agents in Tackling Dripping Air-conditioners (the Scheme) was initiated by the FEHD in 2005 to solicit the assistance of property management agents (PMAs) in handling complaints about dripping air-conditioners in private housing estates during the summer season. In 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 (up to July 31), the respective numbers of participating PMAs were 78, 80, 82 and 84 and those of participating housing estates were 267, 269, 270 and 269. The respective percentages of cases resolved by the PMAs and cases referred to the FEHD for

follow-up actions during the same period are set out in Annex 6.

Under the Scheme, the staff of the participating PMAs will, in the course of performing routine management duties in the housing estates, help identify the sources of the water dripping problems and advise the occupants concerned to rectify them. If the PMAs' efforts are in vain, the FEHD will take up the cases. The FEHD provides relevant briefings and training for the staff of the participating PMAs, maintain timely communication with them and follow up on the referral cases. After evaluation, the FEHD will issue letters of appreciation at the end of every summer season to commend the PMAs which have actively participated in the Scheme for their efforts and contributions in handling the problems properly.

(5) Devices such as digital cameras, high definition telescopes, retractable and adjustable video borescope inspection cameras (with LED lamps) are currently used by FEHD staff to facilitate long-range observation at night time or under poor lighting environment, with a view to identifying the sources of the water dripping from air-conditioners more effectively. The FEHD reviews the methods of investigating dripping air-conditioners from time to time, and will actively consider the use of new technology to enhance the effectiveness of its investigation.

(6) To increase its manpower to cope with the massive workload of investigation, the FEHD has launched a pilot scheme since the summer of 2016 to recruit contract staff for setting up dedicated teams, which are deployed to districts with more serious problems of water dripping from air-conditioners. The duty time of the dedicated teams includes public holidays and non-office hours, facilitating more flexible manpower deployment to tackle the problem by conducting proactive inspections at relatively serious black spots in the districts during different times of the day. The number of dedicated teams has gradually increased from six (30 staff members) in 2017 to nine (45 staff members) this year.