

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.

