

Press Release

LCQ13: Vacant government premises and sites

Wednesday, February 22, 2017

Following is a question by the Hon Nathan Law and a written reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Professor K C Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 22):

Question:

Some community groups have relayed to me that they have all along hoped that they can rent idle government premises (including vacant school premises (VSPs)) or lands for implementing community economy projects, so as to create job opportunities and improve the livelihood of the grass roots. However, the Government has not made public the relevant applications procedure and information, making it difficult for them to materialise such projects. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective government departments which are responsible for managing various types of idle government premises at present; whether those departments have compiled lists of idle government premises which are under their management; if so, of the details; if not, whether they will consider compiling such lists;

(2) of the respective numbers of VSPs currently with plans of reuse for educational purposes, and those without such plans; of a breakdown of such numbers by (i) District Council district, (ii) the government department responsible for managing the VSP, and (iii) the number of years (i.e. less than one year, one to three years, and three years or more) for which the VSP has been left vacant;

(3) of the expenditure involved in the management and maintenance of VSPs, as well as the number of times for which such premises were leased to community groups on short-term tenancies (i.e. for terms of three years or below), in each of the past three years;

(4) whether it has plans to entrust a single government department to be responsible for collating information on all idle government premises and lands,

as well as for handling the relevant renting applications; whether the Government will set out clearer criteria for handling idle government premises, including specifying a maximum number of years for which such premises may be left vacant;

(5) of the existing channels through which community groups may make enquiries about the application procedure for renting various idle government premises and lands; and

(6) of the respective numbers of applications from community groups/social welfare organisations for renting idle government premises which have been received, approved and rejected by the authorities in each of the past five years, as well as the reasons for rejecting some of the applications?

Reply:

President,

The Government has been committed to planning, allocating and managing its land and properties in an efficient and cost-effective manner to optimise the use of public resources and site utilisation.

In respect of government land, according to the information of the Development Bureau (DEVB), the Government does not have a definition of or compile statistics on the so-called "idle land" (i.e. unleased or unallocated government land). Only part of the unleased or unallocated government land is suitable for development. For such land, different stages (including the various required technical assessments and statutory procedures, site formation and road improvement works, and the provision of necessary infrastructure and facilities for development) have to be gone through for the "potential sites" to become developable "disposable sites". Therefore, individual unleased or unallocated government sites may only reflect that they are not let out under short term tenancy or for other temporary uses. They may have been planned or under planning for long-term uses, or may be undergoing the various required technical assessments, procedures or works for long-term development or temporary uses. These sites should not be regarded as "idle". Where there is government land suitable for development, the Government will consider allocating the concerned land for long-term uses or temporary uses, including

making it available for use by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through different means.

In respect of government properties, leasing of suitable surplus government properties (i.e. those that are surplus to government operational requirements at that time) to NGOs may be considered, provided that policy support has been obtained from the relevant bureau(x).

Having consulted DEVB, Education Bureau (EDB), Government Property Agency (GPA), Housing Department (HD), Lands Department (LandsD) and Planning Department (PlanD), our reply to six parts of the question raised by Hon Law are as follows:

(1) Under the Accommodation Regulations (AR), government departments are responsible for the proper management and gainful use of their surplus government properties, if any. They are also responsible for identifying alternative users (including government departments and NGOs) for the concerned properties as soon as practicable. GPA keeps the information provided by departments on their surplus properties.

(2) According to EDB's record, as at end-January 2017, there were 18 vacant school premises (VSP) and two partial VSP under EDB's purview which are earmarked/retained for school or other educational uses. Information on the aforementioned VSP (including the district and year of school closure) is provided at Annex 1.

As for VSP no longer required by EDB for school or other educational uses (hereunder named as "ex-school premises"), EDB will inform PlanD and other relevant departments (such as LandsD and HD) in accordance with the central clearing house mechanism. PlanD will consider suitable alternative long-term uses (such as government, institution/community, residential and other uses) for the concerned ex-school premises sites. Upon confirmation on the long-term uses of the concerned ex-school premises sites through Government's internal mechanism, PlanD will inform the relevant departments (such as LandsD and HD, etc.) of the recommendations for their follow up as appropriate.

According to the information provided by DEVB, as at end-January 2017,

PlanD has reviewed the long-term uses of 173 ex-school premises sites (Note 1) under the central clearing house mechanism, and confirmed the long-term uses of such sites through the Government's internal mechanism. The distribution of these ex-school premises sites by district is at Annex 2. Among them, 115 ex-school premises situated on government land are managed by LandsD (Note 2). The rest are either managed by EDB, HD and GPA respectively, or are situated on private land. PlanD and LandsD do not have information on the duration for which the ex-school premises have been left vacant.

Note 1: Some of the ex-school premises may have been demolished, arranged with temporary uses or deployed for other long-term uses.

Note 2: As at end-November 2016, 72 of the 115 sites have been approved for long-term/short-term uses or will soon be deployed for long-term uses or have planned uses being considered by LandsD; 35 have been/will be included in the list of vacant government sites for application for short-term uses; five are not available for application for the time being due to potential slope-related risks; and three are subject to appropriate action by LandsD to recover possession.

(3) EDB is responsible for the management of VSP located on sites allocated to EDB. In 2014-15 and 2015-16, the expenditures incurred by EDB for the management of VSP were \$0.957 million and \$1.221 million respectively, while the estimated expenditures to be incurred in 2016-17 are \$1.45 million. The expenditures mainly include security patrol and inspections, pest control, removal of litter, as well as cleansing and weeding.

LandsD's work in the management of ex-school premises sites is performed as a part of the land control work of its individual District Lands Offices. The work of management of ex-school premises sites by LandsD involves erecting government notice boards and fencing on site, grass-cutting as necessary and providing security services with the stationing of security guards on site or regular patrolling as necessary, etc. Due to the time constraints, LandsD has difficulty in providing a meaningful estimate of the expenditures on the management and maintenance of ex-school premises sites for the past three years.

As for ex-school premises sites under the management of HD and GPA, the relevant expenditures are absorbed from within the existing resources of

respective departments.

In the past three years, there were a total of four cases involving the allocation of ex-school premises sites for use by NGOs through short term tenancy. As for VSP which have been earmarked/retained for educational uses, to put land resources to gainful use, EDB will circulate, on a half-yearly basis, a list of VSP earmarked for educational uses but suitable for short-term use to relevant bureaux and departments, with a view to identifying short-term use pending the deployment of such VSP for the earmarked use. As the VSP concerned have been earmarked/retained for educational uses, EDB will not accept direct application from NGOs.

(4) and (5)

Government land (including ex-school premises sites)

As mentioned above, the Government does not have a definition of or compile statistics on the so-called "idle land". When long-term development projects are being taken forward, LandsD will be responsible for leasing and allocating the relevant developable sites. These sites may be put on the market through the Government's Land Sale Programme, allocated to individual bureaux/departments for specific uses, or leased to NGOs for development with the support of relevant bureau(x).

As regards developable land not yet leased or allocated for long-term development uses and other government land which has yet to be planned for long-term development uses, they are in general under the management of LandsD. To optimise the utilisation of land resources, LandsD will, where practicable and appropriate, allocate these sites to individual bureaux/departments for temporary uses; lease them for various commercial purposes through tender (e.g. fee-paying public carpark); or subject to the support of relevant bureau(x), lease them directly to particular organisations or bodies for temporary uses that support specific policy objectives. If an individual piece of government land is adjacent to private land and fulfils the criteria for direct grant (including the criterion that the land cannot be leased on its own to persons other than the applicant due to its location, topography, area), LandsD may also consider granting the relevant site directly to the applicant. The above arrangements aim at making optimal use of the developable land

before the long-term development uses are implemented.

The website of LandsD contains information on the application procedures for use of vacant government land (including ex-school premises sites under LandsD's management) for short-term community, group or non-profit-making purposes. Moreover, LandsD also provides information on sites that may be applied by NGOs for temporary greening or other community purposes (including information on ex-school premises sites under its management) in respective districts to the relevant District Councils, District Offices and District Social Welfare Offices, and makes the information available in the subject District Lands Offices for public inspection free of charge. To further facilitate public inspection of the information on the ex-school premises sites managed by LandsD which may be applied by NGOs for short-term uses, LandsD is actively making arrangements for online inspection and hopes to implement the measure in the short term.

PlanD is also planning to circulate the list of ex-school premises sites with long-term uses confirmed under the central clearing house mechanism to the relevant District Offices and District Social Welfare Offices, deposit the list at PlanD's Planning Enquiry Counters, and upload it onto PlanD's website for public inspection. Similar to other government sites, if any organisation wishes to use ex-school premises sites handled under the central clearing house mechanism for a specific "Government, Institution or Community" ("G/IC") use, support of the relevant policy bureau(x) must first be obtained before applying to the responsible managing department of the concerned site for using the school premises in accordance with the established mechanism. PlanD will consider whether the proposed use complies with the recommended long-term land use, the planning intention of the land use zoning on the relevant Outline Zoning Plan, its compatibility with surrounding land uses and environment, the demand and supply of "G/IC" land or facilities in the district, etc., and advise the relevant bureau(x) and departments of the planning views.

Surplus government properties

GPA keeps the information provided by departments on their surplus properties. To facilitate application by NGOs, GPA is planning to upload on its website the general information in respect of such properties which are available for leasing, as well as the procedures for making applications to the

relevant bureaux/departments. GPA will also handle enquiries from NGOs in this respect.

The AR sets out the mechanism for handling surplus government properties. According to the AR, departments are responsible for the proper management and gainful use of their surplus government properties, if any. Departments should first identify appropriate alternative user departments as soon as practicable for the concerned properties, followed by leasing the concerned properties through commercial approach or direct leasing to NGOs with the policy support of the relevant bureau(x). Under this mechanism, departments are required to exhaust feasible means of putting surplus properties to gainful use as soon as practicable. As the locations, conditions and applicability of the properties vary, no absolute requirement has been set on their vacancy period.

(6) NGOs interested in making use of surplus government properties may submit an application to the relevant bureau/department and seek policy support. Since such applications are submitted by the NGOs to respective bureaux/departments direct, GPA does not have the statistics on the number of applications received and other relevant statistics.

Ends