

Executive Summary

Direct Investigation Report

Maintenance and Repair of Play and Fitness Equipment in Public Rental Housing Estates Managed by the Housing Department

Introduction

Public rental housing (“PRH”) estates in Hong Kong accommodate a large number of residents. In planning these estates, the Hong Kong Housing Authority (“HKHA”) reserves leisure and recreational space for residents, with children’s playgrounds and fitness equipment provided. There were over 5,000 pieces of play and fitness equipment in PRH estates under HKHA as at June 2020.

2. In recent years, there have been reports about many play and fitness equipment in PRH estates being in a state of disrepair or delays in repairing these facilities, rendering them unavailable for a prolonged period. Moreover, some people find the design of these facilities to be outdated and uninspired, falling short of meeting the leisure and fitness needs of the public.

Our Findings

3. This direct investigation has revealed the following areas for improvement on the part of HKHA/the Housing Department (“HD”) regarding the design and maintenance and repair of play and fitness equipment in PRH estates.

(I) Setting Reasonable Time Frames for Different Procedures for Repairs

4. HD has established basic procedures for following up on repairs of play and fitness equipment in PRH estates, and time frames for some of the procedures. Nevertheless, no time frames are set for two procedures, namely estate management staff to report damage of facilities and works staff to issue inspection orders.

5. According to our findings, between 2017 and 2019, there were cases where HD staff issued an inspection order to the contractor concerned for arranging inspection more than 30 days after finding out the damage of facilities. In our view, HD should

set appropriate time frames for estate management staff to report damage of facilities and for works staff to conduct inspection after receiving such reports and issue inspection orders, so that the progress of repairs of playground facilities will not be hindered by other repairs in PRH estates.

6. Where the PRH estate concerned comprised divested properties, HD often needs to consult residents and other stakeholders after receiving the inspection report and repairs suggestion from the contractor. Our investigation has found that the consultation and discussion involved usually take several months. This resulted in the repairs for the damaged playground facilities being left pending for more than six months, which is unsatisfactory. We are pleased to note that after the commencement of our investigation, HD planned to discuss with Link Real Estate Investment Trust, the biggest owner of divested properties in PRH estates, to set time frames for consultation procedures regarding decision on repair so that frontline staff of the estates can have a set of uniform criteria for reference.

(II) Stepping Up Monitoring of Whole Repair Process

7. While HD’s Enterprise Resource Planning System (“ERP System”) records and manages information relating to the repair works undertaken by the contractors, there are no systematic records but only handwritten entries in the PRH estates’ routine inspection records as to when estate management staff found out the damage of play equipment, whether works staff had been requested to conduct inspection and when they conducted the inspection. Nor has HD introduced any measures for monitoring whether works staff issue repair orders within 30 days after receiving inspection reports from the contractors. Under such circumstances, HD is unable to know the efficiency of follow-up actions by individual estates or by the Department as a whole.

8. We consider it necessary for HD to enhance the mechanism by taking a more proactive and comprehensive approach in monitoring the whole repair process regarding playground facilities in PRH estates to ensure timely follow-up action for each case. Data collected will be useful for future review on the relevant procedures and devising enhancement measures to further improve the quality of service. In the long run, HD should consider recording in the ERP System information about the procedures handled by HD’s frontline staff. On the one hand, the ERP System can accurately and conveniently remind frontline staff to take timely follow-up action. On the other hand, it enables HD to monitor the situation and grasp a clearer picture of the time required for the maintenance and repairs of facilities in general.

(III) Strengthening Training of Frontline Staff Regarding Condition of Damaged Facilities And Necessary Temporary Measures

9. We have found in some cases that individual frontline staff had failed to report and follow up on the aging and damage of rubber tiles in a timely manner. If frontline staff fail to identify accurately the condition of damaged facilities and potential safety risks, it will undermine the effectiveness of maintenance and repair of facilities, thereby causing inconvenience and even safety risks to residents.

10. Moreover, HD requires estate frontline staff to fence off damaged playground facilities where necessary, and instructs the contractors to fence off or remove promptly the dangerous parts to ensure that the rest of the facilities is safe for use. Nevertheless, in some cases, the HD staff concerned did not have the awareness to implement temporary measures as soon as practicable. Nor had they paid attention to the adequacy of temporary measures implemented by the contractors. Frontline staff of the estates concerned also failed to provide adequate information at the site to notify members of the public of the repair arrangement.

11. Apart from the gaps of loosened tiles, which are measurable, whether the wear and tear of tiles and other facilities is serious and whether they should be repaired immediately or replaced are mainly determined by the judgement of frontline staff. Hence, HD must strengthen the training of frontline staff and provide clear and specific guidelines to foster their awareness about safety so that they will properly record and report the wear and tear of facilities, engage contractors to follow up on repairs in a timely manner and provide residents with information about the repair works concerned and/or post a notice to announce the suspension of facilities.

(IV) More Stringent Supervision over Contractors

12. Under the prevailing policy, contractors undertaking the maintenance and repairs of play/fitness equipment in PRH estates under HKHA must be the sole agent of the relevant manufacturers in Hong Kong. As there are only a few contractors, it can be expected that competition is limited. HKHA and HD should therefore take positive steps and exercise more stringent supervision over the contractors to urge them to enhance their efficiency and provide services properly.

Monitor proactively progress of repair orders

13. Currently, HD mainly looks into the reason for delays upon the contractors' completion of the repair works and then rate their performance. Depending on the seriousness of the delays, HD will consider issuing warning letters and removing or suspending the contractors concerned from the Play/Fitness Equipment Agents Reference List. We opine that HD should proactively monitor the commencement and progress of works after issuing a repair order. That will include regular meetings hosted by the contract manager to monitor works progress and requiring the contractors to report the works progress on their own initiative. In case any sign of delay is detected, HD can immediately remind the contractor to follow it up closely so that the possibility and extent of delay could be minimised.

Take serious follow-up action against delays

14. In our opinion, HKHA/HD should review the existing system for monitoring contractors and promptly demand follow-up action and improvement by the contractors when problems are found. HKHA/HD should also introduce tougher measures to monitor and manage contractors with poor performance and increase the penalty, which include exploring the feasibility of providing other Government departments with the performance rating of those contractors as reference so that other departments can take the information into account when examining the tenders for other works submitted by the contractors concerned.

Centralised review on performance rating of contractors

15. HD indicated that it would consider whether the contractors could provide reasonable explanation for delays in repair works when assessing their performance and giving ratings for future reference. However, in our case studies, we found that some works staff deviated from HD's technical guide for maintenance and repairs ("Technical Guide") when rating contractors' performance. HD responded that it was planning to introduce a centralised review mechanism to ensure frontline staff's compliance with the Technical Guide in assessing contractors' performance in repair works so that the performance rating could truly reflect the contractors' performance. We consider such a mechanism necessary, and that HD should also provide works staff who are responsible for giving performance rating with more specific guidelines on performance rating, including listing the factors to be considered and trying to provide examples for reference.

(V) Proactively Improve Design of Play and Fitness Equipment

16. In our view, HD should explore designs that can improve playground facilities in PRH estates in future so as to accommodate the needs of the public. Besides, we hope that HKHA could be more proactive in exploring ways to bring in more contractors to provide more choices in procuring facilities and increase competition among contractors, thereby improving their performance in carrying out repair works.

17. Moreover, HD might need to prepare a survey for soliciting views on the play and fitness equipment in PRH estates particularly, covering residents of different age groups so as to better understand the residents' comments on those facilities and enable HD to draw up design/procurement proposals that most suit users' needs.

18. Although playgrounds in PRH estates are mainly for residents of the estates, HD can still engage the community to gather opinions from different parties on the design or replacement of facilities. We notice that HD has previously included participation of different organisations in art creation in PRH estates. We encourage HD to continue with its effort in this aspect and make reference to these examples and consider launching more channels for public engagement in the design of playgrounds in PRH estates.

Recommendations

19. In view of the above, The Ombudsman has made the following recommendations to HKHA and HD:

- (1) set reasonable time frames for estate management staff to report damage of facilities and for estate works staff to conduct inspections after receiving reports and issue inspection orders to the contractors;
- (2) set reasonable time frames for the procedures on consulting other owners in PRH estates with divested properties on repairs of play/fitness equipment within the estates;
- (3) establish an effective mechanism and specific measures for more stringent monitoring of the whole repairs process regarding playground facilities in PRH estates;

- (4) consider recording in the ERP System the dates on which damage are found and other procedures taken care of by HD's frontline staff are completed and the outcomes thereof;
- (5) strengthen the training of frontline staff regarding inspections of play and fitness equipment and provide clear guidelines so that frontline staff will properly record and report damage of play and fitness equipment, engage contractors to follow up on repairs in a timely manner and provide residents with information about the repair works concerned and/or suspension of facilities as appropriate;
- (6) monitor more proactively the commencement and progress of works after issuing repair orders for play and fitness equipment, and draw up guidelines to set out relevant instructions for estate frontline staff;
- (7) review the existing system for monitoring contractors and promptly demand follow-up action and improvement by the contractors when problems are found, and discuss with HKHA's Contractors Review Committee (Building-Maintenance) and Play/Fitness Equipment Review Board on stepping up measures to monitor and manage the contractors with poor performance and increasing the penalty;
- (8) set up a centralised review mechanism for checking the rating of contractors' performance by frontline works staff, and provide more specific guidelines on assessment criteria;
- (9) explore ways to bring in more contractors in order to provide more choices in procuring facilities; and
- (10) consider introducing different methods to increase public participation in the design and procurement of play and fitness equipment in PRH estates so as to enhance the quality of leisure space.