**SCMP Article**

**Quick fixes for housing crisis are worth a try**

Last week, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service – of which I am the chairperson – announced a Community Housing Movement initiative to provide transitional accommodation for about 1,000 families currently living in very bad conditions. Under this plan, landlords make empty or underutilised units available to non-governmental organisations, which will use them to house poor families waiting for public rental housing.

The council is also studying the idea of using underutilised land for homes made out of containers – a model already used for student- and other low-cost housing in Europe.

The press reported last week that the Science and Technology Parks and the University of Hong Kong are interested in the possibility of using space on their campuses for similar prefabricated housing.

These ideas attracted quite a strong reaction from the public. Reactions seemed sharply divided. One side dismissed these ideas as inadequate, and some commentators criticised the idea of shared apartments as inhumane or insulting to the poor. There was also scepticism about the involvement of large corporate landlords or developers. The idea of modular housing was also attacked as a way of lowering housing quality in the community.

On the other hand, many commentators supported these initiatives. They appreciated that this is not a permanent arrangement, but an interim solution for families with two or three years to wait to get public housing. And they felt that, even if the number of units concerned does not sound large, every little bit helps.

I think these views were essentially “glass half empty” versus “glass half full”.

Just about everyone agrees that Hong Kong’s housing situation is an immediate crisis for many poorer families, and a threat to the aspirations of our younger middle-class population. In theory, if current trends continue, we could end up with an absurd situation where half the population cannot afford even basic housing in their own city. As it is, high costs are cutting into household purchasing power and forcing families into unacceptable accommodation. This is feeding public anger and obviously contributing to our growing social and political divisions.

In the long term, we need significant changes to how we source and allocate land and ensure a sufficient supply of decent affordable housing. But, in the meantime, surely all new ideas are worth a try.

The council’s Community Housing Movement idea is based on existing partnerships where NGOs work with landlords to put empty units to good use. The plan, which has been endorsed by the government, brings landlords and NGOs together on a bigger scale, with the council acting as an intermediary. The Community Chest, professional organisations and others are also helping.

Only legitimate units are accepted. The council will arrange basic renovation. The rents will be capped at 25 per cent of tenants’ household incomes.

The families would otherwise be in possibly unhealthy and dangerous conditions in subdivided apartments. Where families (typically headed by single mothers) share apartments, they will share chores and provide mutual support. The welfare agencies who refer clients as tenants will also continue to offer help during the clients’ time in the units.

Some landlords are offering units at a nominal charge. For others, the arrangement can offer a trouble-free way to make at least some income from an otherwise empty flat. And they know that the tenants are planning to move on after a while.

This approach is essentially about unlocking vacant living space – a principle along the lines of the “sharing economy”.

No one expects this single project to solve our longer-term housing problem. But, as with using spare land for container housing, it is creative and pragmatic. Maybe some of these concepts can be scaled up and larger numbers of poorer families will escape substandard conditions. After years of little or no action, surely we have nothing to lose and much to gain by trying some new ideas.