HKIA SMALL RESEARCH PROJECT

The Impact of High Density Development Control

on the Quality of Living Space

by

All Arts Architectural Design and Research Ltd

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The Research Team

All Arts Architectural Design and Research Ltd

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Design and Administration</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining “Quality of Living Space”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lease Matters</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Environmental Matters</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Control</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Matters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design Aspects</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lands Matters</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Environmental Matters</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Control</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Measures</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design Aspects</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Studies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX 1 – FIGURES</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX 2 – SAMPLE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE SHEET</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This is one of the small research projects commissioned by the Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA) in early 2006 under the HKIA Research fund to support research projects to help HKIA to meet the contemporary need and new programmes of the Institute. This particular project aims to critically review the development control mechanism in support of dense development in Hong Kong and to investigate its role in providing a quality living environment in the dense urban context of Hong Kong. The result of this project is intended to be used by the HKIA only for the good of the Institute, and the report shall not be publicized for other purposes.

Hong Kong is well known for its problem of being densely populated in urban area. Government plays an important role in the supply side of the private housing market through its monopolistic control of land sales and development control through various legal controls in planning, building and land aspects. The current approach is to intensify the use of existing urban land by evaluating the existing development control law with a view to allowing for sustainable dense urban development in Hong Kong.

Preferred private housing estates planning and design are expected to provide the benefits of better neighborhood environment, exclusive communal facilities, more open space and greater design flexibility for the residents. Ample provision of public space can enhance health and quality of living. In the context of Hong Kong, however, private housing development is often built to the maximum permissible density under the statutory requirements imposed by the government.
Under the current development control system, private developers seek to maximize the saleable floor area at the expense of the common areas. As a result, the typical building layouts generate a large number of housing units clustered around a cruciform, high-rise compact core. Such built form is perhaps efficient from the production perspective of the developers. It does not necessarily take adequate consideration of the living quality issues from the perspective of the residents.

With the pressing need in society on housing supply and housing quality, it warrants a more structured research project to investigate the constraints of planning and building regulations on high-density property development in the urban environment of Hong Kong, and the impact of high density development control on quality of living space. A systematic study in this area will pave way for further research on other wider issues such as sustainable development and integrated land-use planning for urban renewal in Hong Kong.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to undertake a structured and focused research to critically review the development control laws in support of dense development in Hong Kong’s urban environment and investigate the balance point for the development control to provide a quality living environment that is acceptable to the community.

The objectives of the study are to:-

- Review the development control legal framework and quality living space
- Identify drawbacks of existing development control laws
- Appreciate problems in design and possible design solution for quality living space
Identified possible changes to relevant development control provisions
Develop recommendations

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken by

- reviewing literature on relevant development control legal provisions
- reviewing issues of quality living space
- critically examining relevant case studies of modern residential buildings in Hong Kong
- soliciting comments and views from design professionals involving in some environmentally conscious residential building projects

The researchers undertook the study through a postal questionnaire survey to all full members of HKIA in October 2006.

Questionnaire Design and Administration

Following a literature review, a questionnaire survey (hereinafter ‘the survey’) was conducted by sending out a 4-page questionnaire to all full members of HKIA. Over 160 responses were received. This report offers a description and an analysis of the 149 valid responses received from the target population of 2400 samples. This yielded a response rate of 6.2%. Table 1 shows the detailed profile of respondents.
Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents (N=149)

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ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

Defining “Quality of Living Space”

For the purposes of this study, the researchers proposed a list of six attributes to define the quality of living space. Majority of the respondents agreed that the quality of living space should embrace the attributes of: enjoyment of personal privacy (90%); security (89%); and interaction with natural environment (93%). Well over half of the respondents show moderate agreement on aspects relating to efficient transportation system (68%), human circulation system (69%) and social interaction (70%). Overall the respondents are in favour of the six attributes with particular concern on issues related to personal privacy, security and opportunity to interaction with natural environment.

Summary of Views [Figures 1-6]

- Enjoyment of Personal Privacy [90% agreed]
- Enjoyment of Personal Security [89% agreed]
- Opportunity for Interaction with Natural Environment [93% agreed]
- Enjoyment of Efficient Transportation System [68% agreed]
- Enjoyment of Efficient Human Circulation System [69% agreed]
- Opportunity for Social Interaction [70% agreed]
Lease administration is a critical process of a development project. Most of the respondents (84%) considered that approval time and lease modification rules should be clearly specified so that development projects could be administered with more certain statutory timeframe and clear administrative procedures. The terms “gross floor area” and “saleable area” are commonly used by private developers in floor area measurements for uncompleted residential properties. According the Legislative Council paper for Panel on Housing (LC Paper No. CB(1) 1936/99-00, Ref: CB1/PS/2/99), the adoption of standardized measurements of “gross floor area” and “saleable area” will enhance uniformity and transparency and will greatly facilitate potential homebuyers in accurately comparing the size (and price) of uncompleted residential properties. Considering the “saleable area”, most of the respondents (88%) agreed that the method of calculation should be clearly defined, unified and recognized by all government departments and professional bodies. On the whole, streamlining the lease administration process and procedures is key to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the development control process.

Summary of Views [Figures 7-8]

- Attitudes towards clear approval time period & leases modification rules [84% agreed]
- Attitudes towards clearly defined method for “saleable area” calculation [88% agreed]
Planning and Environmental Matters

For planning matter, 76% of the respondents agreed that OZP should be reviewed periodically. For planning applications, 71% and 67% of the respondents respectively agreed that proposals with change of use enhancing public interest and that with new use compatible with surrounding areas should be favorably considered by the government authorities. 65% of the respondents agreed that proposals to allow transfer of development potential from a development-restricted site should be favorably considered.

For environmental issue, 67% of the respondents agreed that all environmental matters should be controlled under one planning control system.

Summary of Views [Figures 9-13]

- OZP should be reviewed periodically [76% agreed]
- Favorably considered proposals with change of use enhancing public interest [71% agreed]
- Favorably considered proposals with new use compatible with surrounding areas [67% agreed]
- Favorably considered proposals to allow transfer of development potential from a development-restricted site [65% agreed]
- All environmental matters should be controlled under one planning control system [67% agreed]
Building Control

Responses to suggested changes in building control issues were diverse. Prescriptive site coverage and prescribed window controls under the present building control system have led to monotonous and monolithic designs of residential buildings. Well over half of the respondents (73%) agreed that building control laws should be more performance based. The objective and performance criteria of each and every technical requirement are expressly stated. This would enable building professionals to explore alternative design approaches and come up with innovative design solutions that can best meet the objectives of the regulations as well as the needs of their clients. With performance based building regulations, building professionals are free to exercise creativity in their design solutions as long as the objectives of the performance-based regulations are achieved.

However, less than half of the respondents (45%) agreed that Buildings Ordinance should only focus on control of technical aspects & leave the planning matters to planning control [18% disagreed] [35% neutral].

To control the scale of development, more than half of the respondents (53%) agreed that building control should give more emphasis on “3D control” while some (58%) agreed that height of a development relative to particular landmarks/ background buildings/ strategic views should be considered in a statutory submission, separated from the Buildings Ordinance. Half of the respondents (51%) considered that the combined effect of the massing of a development should be scrutinized separately in the planning approval system. To assess maximum plot ratio, respondents presented diverse views, 31% agreed, 35% disagreed and 34% neutral, on traffic study being the major criteria for plot ratio assessment.
Summary of Views [Figures 14-19]

- Building control laws should be more performance based [73% agreed]
- Buildings Ordinance should only focus on control of technical aspects & leave the planning matters to planning control [45% agreed] [18% disagreed] [35% neutral]
- Building control should give more emphasis on “3D control” [53% agreed] [24% disagreed]
- Traffic study should be major criteria to assess maximum plot ratio [31% agreed] [35% disagreed] [34% neutral]
- Height of a development relative to particular landmarks/ background buildings/ strategic views should be considered in a statutory submission, separated from the Buildings Ordinance [58% agreed] [24% disagreed] [18% neutral]
- The combined effect of the massing of a development should be scrutinized separately in the planning approval system [51% agreed] [24% disagreed] [25% neutral]

Administrative Matters

Most of the respondents (80%) agreed that a centralized unit/ system across different government departments should be set up/ adopted to resolve the missing link between land-use policy and its implementation practice. For approval issues, majority of the respondents (89%) considered that statutory periods should be set for all types of approval including planning, land and building matters. With particular concern on calculation of
Gross Floor Area, overwhelming positive responses (91%) were received to support for standardizing the different GFA calculation methods among government departments.

Summary of Views [Figures 20-22]
- A cross-departmental centralized unit/system in the government should be adopted to resolve the missing link between land-use policy and its implementation practice [80% agreed]
- Statutory period for approvals should be set for all approvals, including lands matters [89% agreed]
- There should be only one method for calculating GFA recognized by all government departments [91% agreed]

Design Aspects

For profit-making developments, the current development control leads to maximization of the “saleable area”s at the expense of common living spaces. A number of higher standards of quality space design considerations were proposed to enhance environmental and healthy aspects of residential development.

More than half of the respondents agreed that minimum required width of common corridors of 1.5m (53%), minimum required area of passenger lift lobby (56%) and minimum required
area/ specified dimension for habitable rooms (59%) should be prescribed in laws so that the quality of living space could be ensured. Whereas less than half of the respondents considered that service lift (49%) should be provided and minimum Gross Floor Area for different types of apartment with essential facilities of kitchen or bathroom provided (41%) should be prescribed, e.g. floor area size for studio and for flats with one bed, two bed, three bed, etc.

**Summary of Views [Figures 23-27]**

- Min. required widths of common corridors of 1.5m [53% agreed] [25% disagreed]
- Min. required area of passenger lift lobby [56% agreed] [19% disagreed]
- Provision of service lift [49% agreed] [21% disagreed]
- Min. required area and specified dimension for habitable rooms [59% agreed] [22% disagreed]
- Min. required GFA for different types of apartment [41% agreed] [33% disagreed]
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings and observations, suggestions for legal control provisions, administrative measures and design considerations in the development control framework for developing a quality living space are summarized as follows:

Lands Matters

For lands matters, the key improvements needed are mainly concerning administrative procedures, which are lacking of certainty. The administrative procedures should be made more certain with statutory provisions for clear approval time period and lease modification rules. The method of calculating “saleable area” as used by private developers in describing floor area measurements in property sale should be clearly defined and recognized by all government departments and professional bodies. A missing link exists between land-use policy and its implementation in different government departments. It is recommended that the problem should be resolved by adopting a centralized system by the government to co-ordinate development control.

Planning and Environmental Matters

For planning matters, it is recommended that implementation of mixed-use zoning should be more flexible. The following planning applications should be considered favourably:

- 13 -
proposals with change of use that could bring public interest to the community, and

- proposal with new use that is compatible with the surrounding areas, even though the proposed use is not allowed under column 1 or 2 of the Planning Notes.

Further flexibility desired of includes allowing transfer of development potential from a development-restricted site, like a wildlife-rich Conservation Zone to another site, through dialogue between government departments and property owners. For environmental control, most of the pollution control laws are too rigid and diverse. It is recommended that all environmental matters should be controlled under one planning control system.

**Building Control**

Building control laws should be less prescriptive but more performance based. Prescriptive site coverage and prescribed window controls have led to monotonous and monolithic designs of commercial and residential buildings in Hong Kong. Building control should give more emphasis on “three dimensional control” to include consideration of massing, colour scheme, material, and etc. Apart from the clear support of using performance-base building law, the study did not find strong one-sided support on many of the building control issues. However, in recognizing the complexity and subjectivity of the building height and massing, there were over 50% supports for implementing a statutory approving body separated from the current building control and planning control systems to scrutinize the height of a development and the combined effect of the massing of a development.
Administrative Measures

The results show that the administrative efficiency in government departments should be improved. For the administrative procedures in implementing the laws, it is recommended that a centralized system should be established by the government to co-ordinate development control and to minimise discrepancies among departments. For calculation of Gross Floor Area, it is suggested that the different GFA calculation methods should be standardized among government departments. With a view to shortening the time required for a development, it is recommended that statutory period for approval should be set for all approvals, including lands matters. It takes a very long administrative and legislative procedure to produce or amend the OZP, thus periodical review of the OZP should be encouraged to ease undue aggravation on affected citizens. Generally, the administrative procedures for planning control should be more proactive that allows public participation in a development proposal.

Design Aspects

On design aspects, minimum required area/ dimension of basic common building components especially those having significant impacts on the daily life of habitants such as habitable rooms, common corridor and passenger lift lobby. It is recommended that these enhanced design requirements should be prescribed in laws so that the quality of living space could be better improved.
Further Studies

This research has identified many issues with recommendations for improvement. In overall, the key is on improving the administrative procedures for facilitating and approving development proposals. It is recommended that a model should be developed for setting up a central coordinating body to encourage innovation in development proposals and to promote three-dimensional urban design solutions. Further study in this area will pave the way to advance the improvements of the legal framework for sustainable dense urban development in Hong Kong.

CONCLUSION

This paper reviews the high density development control framework in relating to its impact on the quality of living space in Hong Kong. The results show that improvements in many areas, in particular the administrative procedures, are needed and this paper has recommended some of the suggestions for further study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Hong Kong Institute of Architects for providing funding to support this research effort.
APPENDIX I – FIGURES

Fig 1  Enjoyment of Personal Privacy

Fig 2  Enjoyment of Personal Security
Fig 3  
Enjoyment of Efficient Transportation System

Fig 4  
Enjoyment of Efficient Human Circulation System
QUALITY OF LIVING SPACE
Opportunity for Social Interaction

Fig 5  Opportunity for Social Interaction

QUALITY OF LIVING SPACE
Opportunity for Interaction with Natural Environment

Fig 6  Opportunity for Interaction with Natural Environment
Fig 7  Attitudes towards clear approval time period & leases modification rules

Fig 8  Attitudes towards clearly defined method for “saleable area” calculation
Fig 9  Favorably considered proposals with change of use enhancing public interest

Fig 10  Favorably considered proposals with new use compatible with surrounding areas
PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS
Favorably Considered Proposals to allow Transfer of Development Potential from a Development-Restricted Site

Fig 11  Favorably considered proposals to allow transfer of development potential from a development-restricted site

PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS
Periodical review of OZP should be reviewed

Fig 12  Periodic review of OZP should be reviewed
PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS
All environmental matters should be controlled under one planning control system

Fig 13 All environmental matters should be controlled under one planning control system

BUILDING CONTROL
Building control laws should be more performance based

Fig 14 Building control laws should be more performance based
BUILDING CONTROL

Building control should give more emphasis on “3D control”

Fig 15 Building control should give more emphasis on “3D control”

BUILDING CONTROL

Traffic study should be major criteria to assess maximum plot ratio

Fig 16 Traffic study should be major criteria to assess maximum plot ratio
BUILDING CONTROL
Buildings Ordinance should only focus on control of technical aspects & leave the planning matters to planning control

Fig 17 Buildings Ordinance should only focus on control of technical aspects & leave the planning matters to planning control

BUILDING CONTROL
Height of a development relative to particular landmarks/ background buildings/ strategic views should be considered in a statutory submission, separated from the Buildings Ordinance

Fig 18 Height of a development relative to particular landmarks/ background buildings/ strategic views should be considered in a statutory submission, separated from the Buildings Ordinance
Fig 19  The combined effect of the massing of a development should be scrutinized separately in the planning approval system

Fig 20  A cross-departmental centralized unit/system in the government should be adopted to resolve the missing link between land-use policy and its implementation practice
**ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

Statutory period for all approvals should be set for all approvals, including lands matters

![Chart showing responses to the statement](image1)

**Fig 21** Statutory period for all approvals should be set for all approvals, including lands matters

**ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

There should be only one method for calculating GFA recognized by all government departments

![Chart showing responses to the statement](image2)

**Fig 22** There should be only one method for calculating GFA recognized by all government departments
Fig 23  Min. widths of common corridors of 1.5m

Fig 24  Min. area of passenger lift lobby
Fig 25  Provision of service lift

Fig 26  Min. area and specified dimension for habitable rooms
Fig 27  Min. GFA for different types of apartment
Fig 28  Grade of Membership

Fig 29  Mode of Practice
Fig 30  Years of post qualification experience

Fig 31  Sector
APPENDIX 2 – SAMPLE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE SHEET

The Impact of High Density Development Control on the Quality of Living Space

QUESTIONNAIRE

This is one of the research project commissioned under the HKIA Research fund, which aims to critically review the development control mechanism in support of dense development in Hong Kong and to investigate its role in providing a quality living environment in the dense urban context of Hong Kong. We need your participation in providing your opinions on the following statements.

AS AN OVERALL CONSIDERATION FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS, PLEASE PUT A TICK (√) IN THE APPROPRIATE BOX TO REPRESENT THE DEGREE OF YOUR AGREEMENT WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree (SD)</th>
<th>Disagree (D)</th>
<th>Neutral (N)</th>
<th>Agree (A)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (SA)</th>
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</table>

The collected data will be treated confidential and used for overall analysis and drawing collective conclusions for this study only. You may return the completed questionnaire to HKIA by post (HKIA research, 19/F, One Hysan Avenue, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong) or by Fax: 25193364.

1. Defining “Quality of Living Space” for this research

Do you agree that the attributes of “Quality of Living Space” should encompass the followings:

(i) Enjoyment of personal privacy

(ii) Enjoyment of personal security

(iii) Enjoyment of efficient transportation system

(iv) Enjoyment of efficient human circulation system within a development

(v) Opportunity for social interaction (usable communal space for social gathering/leisure/recreation)

(vi) Opportunity for interaction with natural environment (Access for natural lighting/cross-ventilation, balcony space & the green space, etc.)

(vii) Others (Please specify) __________________________________________
2. Lease Matters

2a. Do you agree that the existing administrative procedures should be made more certain with statutory provisions for clear approval time period and lease modification rules?

2b. There should be one clearly defined method for calculating the saleable floor area that is recognized by all government departments and professional bodies?

2c. Others (Please specify) ____________________________________________

3. Planning & Environmental Controls

3a. It has been suggested that the implementation of mixed-use zoning should be more flexible. In practice, do you agree that the following planning applications should be considered favorably:

(i) Proposals with change of use that could enhance public interest to the community, even though the proposed use is not allowed under column 1 or 2 of the Planning Notes;

(ii) Proposal with new use that is compatible with the surrounding areas, even though the proposed use is not allowed under column 1 or 2 of the Planning Notes;

(iii) Proposal to allow transfer of development potential from a development-restricted site (e.g. heritage/historical buildings) to an adjoining site, through dialogue between government departments and property owners.

3b. The present planning system involves a very long administrative and legislative procedure to produce or amend the OZP. Do you agree that periodical review of the OZP should be encouraged to ease undue aggravation on affected citizens?

3c. Currently, some environmental matters, such as the EIA, are controlled under another environmental control system separated from the planning control. Do you agree that all environmental matters should be controlled under one planning control system?

3d. Others (Please specify) ____________________________________________

4. Building Control

4a. Prescriptive site coverage and prescribed window controls under the present building control system have led to monotonous and monolithic designs of residential buildings. Do you agree that:

(i) building control laws should be less prescriptive but be more performance based? _________

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_______
(ii) building control should give more emphasis on “three dimensional control” to include consideration of massing, colour scheme and material, etc.

(iii) traffic study should be the major criteria to assess the maximum plot ratio allowable for a specific site?

(iv) the Buildings Ordinance should only focus on control of technical aspects and leave the planning matters to planning control?

4b. Building height can be very a controversial issue for plan approval. Do you agree that the height of a development relative to particular landmarks or background buildings or strategic views should be considered in a statutory submission, separated from the Buildings Ordinance?

4c. The combined effect of the massing of a development (i.e. the arrangement, volume and shape of a building or group of buildings in relation to other buildings and spaces) should be scrutinized separately in the planning approval system?

4d. Others (Please specify)

5. Administrative Measures

5a. There is a missing link between land-use policy and its implementation practice among different government departments. Do you agree that the problem can be resolved by adopting a cross-departmental centralized unit/system in the government (i.e. One Stop Shop Approach) to co-ordinate development control and to minimize discrepancies among departments?

5b. In order to provide certainty on the time required for a development, do you agree that the statutory period for approval should be set for all approvals, including lands matters?

5c. Do you agree that there should be only one method for calculating GFA that is recognized by all government departments?

5d. Others (Please specify)

6. Design Aspects

6a. For profit-making developments, the current development control leads to maximization of the saleable floor areas at the expense of common living spaces. Do you agree that the following higher standards of quality space should be prescribed in laws so that the quality of living spaces could be enhanced?

- minimum widths of common circulation corridors of 1.5m
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- **minimum area of passenger lift lobby in proportion to the number/size of individual flats in a single storey**
- **Provision of service lift in proportion to the number/floor area of storey in a building**
- **Habitable rooms should achieve the minimum required areas and comply with specified critical dimensions of length and width and room height;**
- **Minimum gross floor area for different types of apartment with essential facilities of kitchen & bathroom provided (e.g. floor area size for studio and for flats with one bed, two bed, three bed, etc);**
- **Others (Please specify) ____________________________________________**

Any other suggestions/methods to enhance design for quality living space (Please specify):

_________________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________

---

**Reference Data (please ✓ as appropriate)**

You are a:  
- Member ☐  
- Fellow ☐  of the HKIA, or  
- Others ☐  Specify:________________________

You are in active practice:  
- Yes ☐  
- No ☐

Your number of years of practical experience after your professional qualification is more than:  
- 1 year ☐  
- 5 years ☐  
- 10 years ☐  
- 15 years ☐  
- 20 years ☐

You are practicing in the:  
- Private sector ☐  
- Public sector ☐

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**Do you want to take part in further discussion or sharing the preliminary findings with the research team? If yes, please leave your contacts:**

Name___________________________, Tel:____________________ Fax: _______________________

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You may return the completed questionnaire to HKIA (Attn: Prof. Edwin H W Chan) by Fax: 25193364.

THANK YOU!

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- 36 -