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\$4.9m for study on asbestos approved

By JIMMY LEUNG

THE Housing Authority's building committee yesterday approved \$4.9 million for a consultancy study to help formulate long-term policy on asbestos building materials in public housing.

The department's chief maintenance surveyor, Mr Robin Carpenter, said during the nine-month study, consultants would draw up guidelines and procedures for the removal and encapsulation of low-risk asbestos cement materials.

"The consultants will establish an order of priority for the department, pinpointing areas which have the greater risk.

"We have to ensure that the asbestos does not pose a problem to tenants," said Mr Carpenter.

Building Committee chairman Mr Edward Ho Sing-tin said the department should make information from the study available to the public.

He said this would put the problem in proper perspective and help allay fears.

Mr Carpenter said asbestos solidly embedded in cement posed a risk only if asbestos fibres were released into the air.

More than 400 public housing blocks suspected to contain asbestos cement have been identified by the department during a survey.

Work is being carried out

to remove or encapsulate asbestos cement found in balcony and staircase grilles as well as in roofing tiles.

Apart from drawing up a list of suspect buildings, Mr Carpenter said the consultants would also conduct random checks on other blocks not surveyed by the department.

He said their priority at present was to handle the problem of asbestos cement in the chimney flues of 80 to 90 estate restaurants.

He said if they could not be removed then they would be sealed up to prevent the release of asbestos fibres into the air.

But Miss Trini Leung Wing-yue, of the Joint Committee for Concern of Asbestos in Public Housing doubted the effectiveness of a consultancy study.

She said she wondered whether the consultants would concentrate on the cost-effectiveness of dealing with the problem rather than the health of the workers and residents.

"There has been a lot of disinformation in the department's booklet on what the tenants should know about asbestos in public housing estates.

"Much of the information deals with how to calm public fears without addressing the issue," said Miss Leung, adding that both the Housing Authority and the Housing Department must be accountable