

For information
on 8 November 2016

Legislative Council
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Public Columbarium Project at Shek Mun

Purpose

This paper aims to brief Members on our plan to pilot a totally smoke-free columbarium at Shek Mun for testing public acceptability. We also take the opportunity to update Members on the progress in taking forward the Government's three-pronged strategy on columbarium policy.

Piloting a totally smoke-free columbarium at Shek Mun

2. When the Shatin District Council ("STDC") was consulted on the Shek Mun columbarium project on 12 May 2016 (see **Annex 1** for details), some DC members suggested that the Government should consider going for a totally smoke-free columbarium at Shek Mun, i.e. a columbarium that is totally devoid of facilities for burning offerings or joss sticks. We undertook to consider this proposal at the detailed design stage before seeking funds from LegCo to construct the columbarium.

3. Allocation of niches is not district-specific, but used by families from across the territory. While we should take account of local views, we should also strike a balance between such views and all other considerations.

4. Members may wish to note that, since 2009, two newly-built public columbaria have been partially smoke-free, i.e. installing communal

joss paper burners¹ on certain part of the columbarium and disallowing the burning of offerings and joss sticks on the part of the columbarium without burners. They are Diamond Hill Columbarium (Yeung Nim Hall) (commissioned in 2009) and Wo Hop Shek Kiu Tau Road Columbarium Phase V (commissioned in 2012). Together, they provide 63 751 new niches, of which 18 151 (i.e. about 30%) are smoke-free².

5. Past allocation results indicate that members of the public, if and when given a choice, tend to prefer niches on non-smoke-free floors over those on smoke-free floors. Please see the table below, making reference to the take-up rates of smoke-free niches and non-smoke-free niches in the same tranche of the allocation exercise at the Wo Hop Shek Kiu Tau Road Columbarium Phase V as an example –

Type	Description	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Smoke-free – on G/F and 1/F (28% of total)	No. of niches allocated (a)	1609	1824	4862	3885
	Total no. available for allocation (b)	2320	4120	8747	3885
	Allocation rate of smoke-free niches (a/b)	69%	44%	56%	100%
Non-smoke-free – on 2/F to 4/F and outdoor (72% of total)	No. of niches allocated (c)	6808	9452	14038	1184
	Total no. available for allocation (d)	7862	10998	15222	1184
	Allocation rate of non-smoke-free niches (c/d)	87%	86%	92%	100%

¹ Communal joss paper burners are now equipped with modern technology including water scrubber and electrostatic precipitator which would help minimise nuisance of smoke and ashes.

² Communal joss paper burners are installed on some (not all) floors at Yeung Nim Hall of the Diamond Hill Columbarium and only at outdoor locations and on ground floor at Wo Hop Shek Kiu Tau Road Columbarium Phase V.

6. When smoke-free floors were first introduced in 2009, FEHD encountered considerable resistance against the restriction on the burning of offerings and joss sticks on the smoke-free floors. Some members of the public simply disregarded the restrictions and burned offerings and joss sticks at random areas on the smoke-free floors when no FEHD staff or security staff were present. Nevertheless, through continuous education and publicity (e.g. putting up banners to publicise the restrictions) and administrative measures (e.g. frequent patrol by FEHD staff and security staff, especially during peak grave sweeping periods), there has been improvement to the situation. The restriction has now been largely complied with. Visitors of these columbaria still have an option to burn offerings and joss sticks at the communal joss paper burners and joss stick holders at certain locations of the columbarium.

7. Going totally smoke-free at any one columbarium has not been tried out so far. Without any facilities at all for burning offerings and joss sticks, it is unknown how the visitors will behave and whether some of them may still find ways to burn offerings and/or joss sticks in breach of the restriction. Public education and persuasion alone may not suffice. Further stepped-up administrative measures against non-compliance during peak grave sweeping periods also risks triggering confrontation, and the possibility of substantive tensions between FEHD staff and visitors of the columbarium could not be ruled out, let alone the fire hazards that may arise as a result of non-compliant burning of offerings and joss sticks at random areas.

8. In gist, though support-worthy from the environmental protection and sustainable development angles, we assess that it is now premature to embrace totally smoke-free columbaria as a general policy applicable to all columbaria. However, we believe that we should take a bold step forward and test public acceptability through a pilot scheme of a totally smoke-free columbarium. Given the sentiments of STDC as outlined in paragraph 2 above, Shek Mun appears to be an apt candidate for such a pilot study. We need to take a view now for the following reasons –

- (a) provision of communal joss paper burners must be made in the planning stage. Installation after a columbarium has been completed is near-impossible; and

- (b) the smoke-free arrangements must be made transparent before invitation of applications under the niche allocation exercises, so that a consumer could make an informed choice as to whether to take up the niche.

9. For the Shek Mun columbarium project, the following considerations are also relevant –

- (a) Of the public columbaria with DC support, some are at an advanced stage, i.e. tendered (e.g. Tsang Tsui) or to be tendered (Wo Hop Shek Phase 1). In any case, these projects are far away from population centres.

On the other hand, we are only proceeding with the necessary preparatory work for the Shek Mun columbarium project, including proposing amendments to the Approved Sha Tin Outline Zoning Plan (OZP) No. S/ST/32 for rezoning the subject site to “Other Specified Uses” annotated “Columbarium and Garden of Remembrance” and forging ahead with the design of the project with a view to consulting the Panel again before formally seeking funding for the project from the Public Works Sub-Committee and the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in 2018 to 2019 at the earliest.

- (b) The site of the Shek Mun Columbarium is in proximity to two schools (at a distance of about 270 m) and the Shek Mun Estate (about 375 m away), though it is separated from the schools and residential development by the Tate’s Cairn Highway.

The Shek Mun site is conveniently located and easily accessible. The impact on the popularity of the take-up rates of niches attributable to smoke-free niches would less likely be diluted by location and accessibility factors.

- (c) Around the time when the Shek Mun columbarium is completed, we would also have the supply of niches from the Tsang Tsui columbarium (2019), Wo Hop Shek Phase 1 columbarium (2020)

and the Cape Collinson columbarium (tentatively 2021 at the earliest). As the latter three columbaria offering a substantial number of niches are partially smoke-free, consumers who are emotionally attached to the burning of offerings and joss sticks would still have a choice.

10. In the future, whether and how restriction on the burning of offerings and joss sticks should be adopted for other public columbarium projects in the pipeline should be considered on a case-by-case basis, having regard to the geographical locations of the subject columbaria, the planned land uses of the nearby areas as well as local sentiments including the views of the concerned DCs, and the results of the pilot scheme at Shek Mun.

11. To sum up, we propose using the columbarium in Shek Mun as a pilot to test the public acceptance of a columbarium without *any* facilities for and adopting complete restriction on the burning of offerings and joss sticks (i.e. a totally smoke-free columbarium). No burning of offerings and joss sticks would be allowed in the columbarium premises, including the niche floors and communal areas. Also, from the stage of invitation of applications onwards, through measures outlined in **Annex 2**, prospective applicants for niches in the Shek Mun columbarium will be advised of the smoke-free arrangements there.

Progress on taking forward the three-pronged strategy on columbarium policy

12. To meet the long term demand for facilities and services related to the disposal of cremated ashes, the Government adopts the following three-pronged strategy –

- (a) increasing the supply of public niches;
- (b) facilitating the sustainable development of the columbarium sector through introducing a statutory regulatory scheme; and
- (c) promoting green burial.

13. Under the district-based columbarium development scheme, all districts will share the responsibility of constructing public columbaria collectively. Since the second quarter of 2011, we have consulted the relevant DCs on the projects at nine sites, the latest of which is the above-mentioned Shek Mun site, and all DCs indicated support or no-objection to the projects. Details of these projects are summarised at **Annex 3**. These nine projects, which would provide more than 492 000 new niches in total, account for more than half of the total number of new niches available in all the 24 sites.

14. Apart from the nine projects mentioned above, we plan to consult the relevant DCs on another seven sites, listed at **Annex 4**, between end 2016 and end 2017. We will draw up the time line for taking forward the remaining one third of the 24 sites (seven projects³) in due course. In determining which project(s) should be taken forward ahead of others, we have taken into consideration circumstantial factors including known site constraints, funding availability and likely complexity of the works etc.

15. On regulating private columbaria, the Government is committed to re-introducing the Private Columbaria Bill to the Legislative Council, with a view to putting in place a licensing regime for enhancing the regulation of private columbaria in Hong Kong. This is the subject matter of another agenda item at this Panel meeting (vide LC Paper No. CB(2)84/16-17(05)), and is therefore not discussed in detail here.

16. Under current practice, niches are seldom recycled. The cumulative effects over time would be a severe drain on our scarce land resources, to an extent even worse than residential units for the living which are recycled through generations of inhabitants. Therefore, in the long run, reliance on the provision of new niches, be they public or private, for disposal of cremated ashes is not sustainable. It is imperative to promote green burial, which includes the scattering of ashes in Gardens of Remembrance and at sea, as it is a sustainable way of handling human ashes.

³ The Panel was last informed vide our letter dated 17 May 2016 (LC Paper No. CB(2)1531/15-16(01)) that the Government decided to use the potential columbarium site at Fu Shan for the reprovisioning of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary.

17. We last briefed Members on the subject of promoting green burial in May 2016 (vide LC Paper No. CB(2)1419/15-16(03)). To recapitulate, the efforts we made over the years to promote green burial are beginning to bear fruit. The number of green burial cases handled by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department in 2015 accounts for about 8.7% of the total number of deaths in Hong Kong, relative to 4.6% in 2010. In the coming months, we have plans to intensify our publicity and promotion efforts on this front, including a major public education and publicity event on 3 December 2016 at Kowloon Park Piazza, tied in with a mass publicity campaign on green burial through various media channels.

Way Forward

18. We will take forward our plan to use the columbarium in Shek Mun as a pilot to test public acceptable of a totally smoke-free columbarium. We will also continue to take forward the three-pronged strategy. While our long-term goal is for green burial to gain wider public acceptance and become the preferred way to dispose of cremated ashes, we are conscious that this change in mindset and culture will take time. With persistent efforts, we are optimistic that we should be able to progressively secure the required paradigm shift, as borne out by our experience in promoting cremation over land burial. In the meantime, we will continue ensure a robust supply of public niches and move forward with the regulation of private columbaria.

Food and Health Bureau
November 2016

Public columbarium project at Shek Mun

The site at On Hing Lane, Shek Mun, next to the Shatin Refuse Transfer Station (see location plan at **Appendix 1**), is one of the 24 sites under the district-based columbarium development scheme. We started consulting the Sha Tin District Council (“STDC”) as early as 22 July 2010 and secured its support for the columbarium project on 12 May 2016.

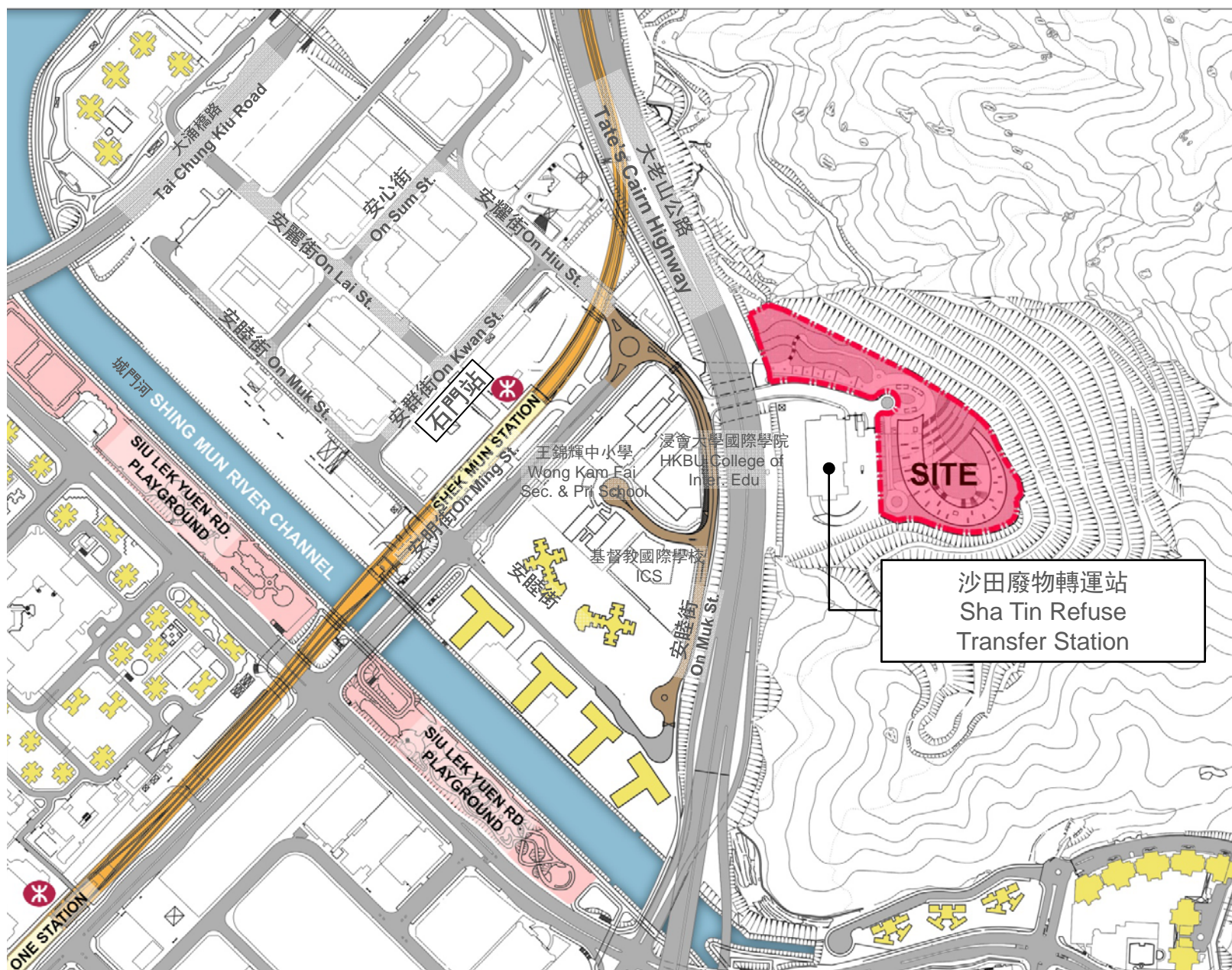
2. The Shek Mun site is conveniently located and easily accessible, within a 15-minute walking distance from MTR Shek Mun Station and in a commercial and industrial area with some school facilities nearby. As the grave-sweeping days are public and school holidays, users of these nearby facilities should be relatively sparse then.

3. The Shek Mun columbarium project will provide about 40 000 niches. The scope of the project mainly includes the construction of a low-rise columbarium building and a Garden of Remembrance with memorial wall(s). In designing the project, the Government aims to blend the proposed columbarium facilities with the surrounding environment, by making the best use of the natural topography of the site. As regards greening, we will provide soft landscaping on rooftop and suitably incorporate vertical landscape, as well as other landscaping features and landscape treatment on slope in appropriate areas of the site for optimising the environmental, aesthetic and amenity benefits. Some preliminary design concepts, which are subject to changes in the detailed design stage, are at **Appendix 2**.

4. The Traffic Impact Assessment (“TIA”) Study of the proposed project has concluded that the additional traffic / pedestrian volume arising from the operation of the columbarium during the grave-sweeping periods will be manageable with special traffic and transport management measures. With a view to enhancing road safety, we have taken on board STDC members’ suggestions to explore the feasibility of providing

a subway underneath Tate's Cairn Highway as the major access to the columbarium site. The preliminary location of the proposed subway is depicted at **Appendix 3**. The TIA update has taken into account new developments such as the Shek Mun Estate Phase II Development and the new operation mode of the nearby Shatin Refuse Transfer Station having regard to the waste division plan implemented by the Environmental Protection Department from early January 2016 onwards, as well as the proposed subway.

Location Plan of the Site at On Hing Lane, Shek Mun



Preliminary Design Concepts for the Shek Mun Columbarium
(Subject to Changes in the Detailed Design Stage)



Figure 1

The columbarium facilities will be blended with the surrounding environment by making the best use of the natural topography of the site.



Figure 2

As regards greening, soft landscaping on rooftop and vertical landscapewill be suitably incorporated, with other landscape features and landscape treatment on slope in appropriate areas of the site, for environmental, aesthetic and amenity benefits.

Preliminary Idea on the Proposed Subway in response to STDC Members' Suggestions



Measures for managing public expectation on restricting the burning of joss sticks and offerings at the Shek Mun Columbarium

Niche Allocation Stage

- To put emphasis in the publicity of future niche allocation exercise on the restriction of burning of offerings and joss sticks on all floors of the columbarium, alongside the concept of paying tribute in a scenic and tranquil environment in memory of the deceased without burning offerings or joss sticks.
- To clearly set out in the application form for niche allocation the restriction on the burning of offerings and joss sticks on all floors and all areas within the Shek Mun Columbarium for compliance by the successful allocatees; and
- To require niche allocatees to sign an undertaking to observe the restriction.

Implementation Stage

- To display banners and notices at conspicuous places in the columbarium reminding visitors of the restriction on the burning of joss sticks and offerings;
- To broadcast regularly through public announcement system to remind the visitors of the restriction; and
- To provide sufficient staff resources including security guards to patrol the columbarium frequently to ensure compliance with the restriction.
- To issue advisory letters to all the members of the public who have been allocated with new niches in this columbarium one month in advance of the Ching Ming and Chung Yeung Festivals during the first two years to remind them of the restriction.

**Columbarium Projects which have Obtained Support
from Relevant District Councils**

	District	Potential Site	Actual / Target Commissioning Year	Number of Niches
1	Wong Tai Sin	Diamond Hill columbarium extension	2012	1 540
2	Islands	Cheung Chau Cemetery extension	2013	1 000
3	Wan Chai	Hong Kong Cemeteries and Crematoria Office (part) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department at Wong Nai Chung Road	2018	855
4	Tuen Mun	Part of the Tsang Tsui ash lagoon next to Black Point Power Station	2019	160 000
5	North	Surplus coffin burial grounds and other land within the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery (Phase 1)	2020	44 000
6	Kwai Tsing	A site on Tsing Tsuen Road near the Tsuen Wan Chinese Permanent Cemetery	To be confirmed	20 000
7	Eastern	A site on Cape Collinson Road opposite the Chai Wan Chinese Permanent Cemetery Columbarium and next to Wan Tsui Estate Park	To be confirmed	25 000
8	North	Undeveloped areas within the Sandy Ridge Cemetery	To be confirmed	200 000
9	Sha Tin	A site on On Hing Lane, Shek Mun, next to Shatin Refuse Transfer Station ¹	To be confirmed	40 000
Total				492 395

¹ For the site at Fu Shan Columbarium extension in Sha Tin, due to traffic constraints, the potential to develop a columbarium and the number of niches that could be provided at this site was lower than those at the Shek Mun site. As such, the Government has decided to use the site for the reprovisioning of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary, while the site at Shek Mun would continue to be reserved for the purpose of columbarium development. We explained this latest position to the Health and Environment Committee of the Sha Tin District Council on 10 March 2016.

**Columbarium Projects for which
Relevant District Councils are to be Consulted
between end-2016 and end-2017**

	District	Potential site
1	Kwai Tsing	A site at the Ex-Kwai Chung Incineration Plant at Kwai Yu Street
2	Kwai Tsing	A site on Kwai Tai Road, southeast of Ex-Kwai Chung Incineration Plant
3	Islands	Lai Chi Yuen extension at Mui Wo
4	Tsuen Wan	A site at the eastern end of Sham Shui Kok Drive, Siu Ho Wan, North Lantau
5	Tsuen Wan	A site at the western end of Sham Shui Kok Drive, Siu Ho Wan, North Lantau
6	Tai Po	A site at the southwestern corner of the Shuen Wan Ex-Landfill, near Tai Po Industrial Estate
7	Yuen Long	A site between San Tam Road and Mai Po Lung Road, San Tin