

Your Ref. : CB4/PAC/R73
Our Ref. : FEHD CI&PC/32-60/10/11C

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13 January 2020

Mr. Anthony Chu,
Clerk to Public Accounts Committee,
Legislative Council Complex,
Legislative Council Road,
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Mr. Chu,

Public Accounts Committee

Consideration of Chapter 1 of the Director of Audit's Report No. 73

Planning, provision and management of public toilets by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

I refer to your letter of 24 December 2019. Our reply is provided in the ensuing paragraphs.

Item (a)

2. To take forward the Enhanced Public Toilet Refurbishment Programme (Enhanced PTRP), additional manpower including 20 professional/site supervisory/technical/clerical staff and 6 officers have been or will be deployed to the Architectural Services Department (ArchSD) and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) respectively to plan, coordinate and implement various refurbishment and facelifting projects under the

Enhanced PTRP. With the additional resources in place, the two departments are able to speed up planning of the refurbishment and facelifting works, monitoring of the performance of the project consultants/contractors and works progress, submissions and vetting of the design proposals, and ensure timely commencement and completion of the project works

Item (b)(i)

3. In the recent five years from 2015-16 to 2019-20, out of the 97 public toilets which were newly built, reprovisioned or refurbished, 13 refurbished public toilets were not provided with accessible unisex toilets (AUTs) due to site constraints or local objections. Local objections were received during acquisition of additional land for construction of the proposed AUT mainly due to concerns over potential change of land use in the village, obstruction of village access, and potential impact on Feng Shui. In one case, the private land owner refused to grant the right of way to access the proposed AUT.

Item (b)(ii)

4. 263 public toilets had been considered in the Retrofitting Programme for provision of AUTs but found infeasible due to various reasons including site constraints, local objections and complicated land issues. Accessible urinals, braille and tactile signs for toilets and handrails with braille and tactile information were provided as far as practicable to facilitate people with disability and the elderly to use the public toilet facilities. FEHD and ArchSD will continue to explore the feasibility of providing AUTs in these toilets under the Enhanced PTRP.

Item (c)

5. Generally speaking, FEHD will submit the proposal on refurbishment works of the public toilets to respective District Councils about 3 months before the commencement of the proposed works. The paper submitted to the District Council outlines the details of the refurbishment works including the temporary arrangement on provision of portable toilets, if applicable, for consideration of

the District Council.

6. From 2015 to 2019, out of a total of 82 public toilets that were refurbished, 17 were not provided with portable toilets during the refurbishment works period. The reasons were mostly because of site constraints and availability of other public accessible toilet facilities in the vicinities.

Item (d)(i) & (iii)

7. Portable toilets provided by FEHD before 2019 comprised basic provisions of the sanitary fitments, including squatting type water closet, hand-washing facilities, soap dispenser, toilet paper and water flushing system. Regular desludging services are required to remove sludge from portable toilets. The cleansing frequency of portable toilets varies among locations subject to the utilisation rate, ranging from three times a day to twice a week.

8. Since 2019, FEHD has adopted new designs for portable toilets with enhanced facilities, including pedestal type water closets, LED lighting and exhaust fans operated by solar energy with motion sensor switch, mirror and coat hook. We will progressively replace the existing portable toilets at suitable locations by those with new designs upon renewal of the portable toilet services contracts to improve the portable toilets services.

9. Besides, FEHD is conducting a trial on the use of container-type portable toilets at Lok Ma Chau Public Transport Interchange and Tai Lam Tunnel Bus Interchange. The container-type toilets are equipped with up-to-date toilet facilities such as pedestal type water closets, urinals, wash hand basins, sensor type water taps, soap dispensers, electric fans, hand dryers, etc. which are similar to the provision of permanent public toilets. The container-type portable toilets are also equipped with solar power system to provide power for lighting, ventilation and pumping systems. Non-absorbing floor tiles and water seals of water closets are introduced to reduce the smell problem.

10. FEHD will continue to explore new facilities and technologies to improve the hygiene condition of portable toilets and provide better public toilet services.

Item (d)(ii)

11. While portable toilets are in general not provided with toilet attendant services, 2 portable toilets at Leaping Dragon Link, Chai Wan in Eastern District and 8 portable toilets at Fo Yin Road in Tai Po District are provided with attendant services during weekends and public holidays to meet service needs. The container-type temporary toilets at Lok Ma Chau Public Transport Interchange and Tai Lam Tunnel Bus Interchange in Yuen Long District respectively are provided with daily toilet attendant services.

Item (e)

12. FEHD has been actively exploring new facilities and technologies for improving public toilet facilities through various channels including the internet, by reaching out to the trade, local research and development institutions, and conducting field visits. Recent examples on making reference to experiences and technologies outside Hong Kong include:

- (1) With reference to the European experience, FEHD has since May 2019 worked in collaboration with ArchSD and EMSD to study the feasibility of introducing auto cleansing toilets into Hong Kong. Auto cleansing public toilets are individual free-standing modules, each containing a water closet pan and a built-in wash hand basin. After the user has finished using the toilet, opening the door from inside would activate the flushing system and when the user comes out, the door would close and lock. Automatic cleaning and drying of floor and toilet seat would then be carried out within a short period of time before the toilet is ready for use again. A meeting with the representatives of a European company specialising in auto cleansing public toilets was held in September 2019. FEHD is following up.
- (2) In August 2019, FEHD conducted a duty visit to Singapore to better understand the latest developments there in the fields of environmental hygiene and pest control. Particularly, the smart

toilet system with various sensors to detect the level of consumables and condition of the toilets in the commercial toilets in Singapore was studied as we are also implementing smart toilet system in public toilets on a trial basis in Hong Kong.

Item (f)

13. In the recent three years from 2017-18 to 2019-20 (up to 31 December 2019), 26 meetings of the Working Group on Upgrading of Public Toilets (Working Group) were held. As members of the Working Group, representatives from ArchSD offer technical advice on the design and layout proposals as well as the colour/material schemes of the public toilet projects proposed by the project consultants/contractors from design and maintenance perspectives to ensure that FEHD's standards and requirements on the provision of toilet facilities as well as relevant barrier free access requirements are complied with as far as practicable.

Item (g)(i)

14. In general, while initiating consultation for a public toilet project, FEHD will, through District Office (DO) of Home Affairs Department (HAD), inform stakeholders of the purposes, background, key issues requiring attention, and the departmental contact point for enquiries on the subject being consulted. The respective DO will then collate the feedback of the stakeholders and forward it to District Environmental Hygiene Office of FEHD (DEHO) together with DO's assessment, where appropriate.

15. In the case of reprovisioning of Toilet F, the DEHO conducted local consultation through North District Office of HAD and received the feedbacks in May 2012. Among 27 consultees (including 1 District Council member, 5 Village Representatives (VRs) and 21 nearby residents), 26 supported the proposal on the re-provisioning of the public toilet and one offered no comment.

Item (g)(ii)

16. In February 2017, the FEHD received a referral from HAD regarding the objection from a VR against the construction works of Toilet F. He was among the 5 VRs consulted in 2012. The VR alleged that the proposed location of the construction works of Toilet F was situated in front of the sites on which village houses would be built, and that would give rise to “Feng Shui” problem and cause sanitary nuisance to the residents. After several rounds of discussion with the VR and villagers, FEHD agreed to conduct enhanced beautification works at Toilet F, and the construction works resumed in June 2017.

17. Subsequent to the completion of construction works of Toilet F in September 2018 and the beautification works in July 2019, the VR conducted a site visit to the toilet on 15 July 2019 and raised objection to the opening of Toilet F due to dissatisfaction with the beautification works.

Item (g)(iii)

18. In response to the VR’s views, ArchSD conducted further beautification works in September and October 2019 before the opening of Toilet F. The toilet was open for public use on 11 October 2019.

Item (g)(iv)

19. The case of Toilet F was an isolated case that local consultation process had been completed at first without objection from the stakeholders and objection was only received with change in circumstances later (i.e. villagers’ plan to build village houses in front of the toilet site). In respect of any future public toilet projects, we would continue to provide details of our proposals (including the purposes, background, key issues requiring attention) to all relevant stakeholders at an early opportunity to seek their understanding and support. We would also speed up our refurbishment work as far as possible. With additional resources and improvement measures in place under the

Enhanced PTRP, we would aim to shorten the overall timeline to complete a refurbishment project in 2 to 3 years or a facelifting project in 1 to 1.5 years.

Item (h)

20. Among the toilets referred to in Table 6 in paragraph 3.9 of the Audit Report, three public toilets were withdrawn from the PTRP as they were affected by other works or development projects and demolition would be required. As the works or development projects were confirmed after the three public toilets were included in the respective year of the PTRP, action was taken to withdraw these public toilets from the programme to ensure prudent use of public money.

Item (i)

21. In order to expedite the implementation of projects already included under the PTRP and step up the monitoring efforts to ensure their timely completion, the following improvement measures have been implemented to shorten the time required for the refurbishment projects following the completion of the review on workflow of the projects in 2016:

- (1) Applications for land allocations from Lands Department (LandsD) would be made at an early stage as soon as the public toilets are shortlisted for inclusion in the PTRP pending funding approval or when the site boundaries are confirmed. Action would be taken by FEHD to closely monitor the progress of the applications for land allocations;
- (2) Once the designs of the toilets to be refurbished are available, early public consultations on the refurbishment works would be arranged by FEHD;
- (3) Monitoring of the performance of the project consultants/contractors would be stepped up by ArchSD to expedite

the submissions of the design proposals for vetting; and

- (4) Action has been taken by ArchSD to expedite the vetting of the design proposals submitted by project consultants/contractors in order to commence the works as soon as possible.

22. In 2018, FEHD has reviewed the overall progress of the PTRP and considered that more public toilets meeting the basic criteria should be included in the PTRP. We have then introduced the Enhanced PTRP in August 2018. Apart from securing additional resources to take forward more public toilet refurbishment projects, we have further divided the improvement works of the public toilets into two subtypes of works, namely refurbishment and facelifting under the Enhanced PTRP. The overall timeline for refurbishment would be shortened to about 2 to 3 years. The scope of works under facelifting mainly includes replacement of aged facilities and installation of new features, with the prevailing layout and exterior wall remaining unchanged. In this connection, the overall timeline to take forward a facelifting project would be about 1 to 1.5 years in general. We have also made use of the latest utilisation rates collected to prioritise the public toilets for inclusion in the Enhanced PTRP.

23. Apart from the above-mentioned improvement measures, ArchSD is exploring the use of “Design for Manufacture and Assembly” (DfMA) method, which is an innovative approach to minimise on-site assembly works by means of off-site construction works such as prefabrication of wall panels with urinals, and integrated manufacturing of wash basins with sanitary fittings and modular cabinets, etc. so as to shorten the closure period in public toilet refurbishment and facelifting projects, and better ensure that the projects will be completed on time.

Item (j)(i)

24. The aqua privies in question were not converted into flushing toilets mainly due to lack of water supply and/or sewerage system, complicated slope or land issues and local objections. Some were demolished or pending demolition due to low usage.

Item (j)(ii)

25. ArchSD is the department responsible for the construction, reprovisioning and refurbishment works of public toilets and aqua privies. ArchSD will provide the relevant information to Public Accounts Committee separately.

Item (k)(i)

26. Updated status of the 45 aqua privies as at 31 December 2019 is provided as follows:

- (1) Eight aqua privies will be converted to flushing toilets. Conversion works of three of them is in progress. Another three are pending commencement of works. Local consultation on in-situ conversion for one aqua privy is underway. Another aqua privy is pending feasibility study by ArchSD;
- (2) Two aqua privies would be reprovisioned by flushing toilets under private development projects pending commencement;
- (3) Site search and land allocation have been initiated through Planning Department and LandsD to reprovision 10 aqua privies. Sites have been identified for two of them, and application for land allocation is in progress or will follow;
- (4) 13 aqua privies are considered not feasible for in-situ conversion to flushing toilets due to the lack of water supply and/or sewerage system, encroachment to private lands or site constraints. Nine of them have completed in-situ refurbishment to provide interim improvements to their internal condition. FEHD is studying the alternatives of reprovisioning these 13 toilets at other sites or demolition altogether with regard to utilisation level and actual need; and

- (5) 12 aqua privies are planned for demolition. Local consultation was completed for four of them and the proposal would be submitted to District Council shortly. One aqua privy will be closed and handed over to Lands Department for private development. Local consultation on the remaining aqua privies is in progress.

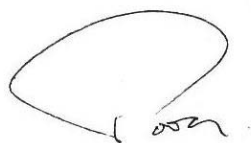
27. As an interim measure pending a longer term arrangement, 9 of the 45 aqua privies have been refurbished to improve their internal condition. FEHD will review the wear and tear condition of aqua privies and plan for refurbishment if required. Apart from regular cleansing operations, FEHD would deploy deep cleansing teams to improve the hygiene conditions of aqua privies. FEHD also applies Microbiological Odour Arresting Agent in the aqua privies on a regular basis for odour control purpose.

28. In respect of the six aqua privies mentioned in paragraph 3.23(e) of the Audit Report, all of them have been closed, pending commencement of demolition works or with site technical issues being resolved by relevant works departments before proceeding with demolition works. It remains our plan to demolish them as soon as practicable.

Item (k)(ii)

29. Taking into account the difficulties and complications encountered in converting aqua privies into flushing toilets, FEHD and ArchSD would collaborate to enhance communications with other relevant departments, including the LandsD and the Water Supplies Department to implement conversion works of the aqua privies and ensure that the works will comply with the existing legislation. For instance, we would timely discuss with LandsD if land issues are involved, and with WSD for an alternative solution in case the proposed water main connection routing is found technically not feasible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'POON Ping-yeung', written in a cursive style.

(POON Ping-yeung)

for Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene

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- Director of Architectural Services (fax no. 2877 0594)
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