

**A brief account of Chapter 1 of Report No. 73
“Planning, provision and management of public toilets by
the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department”
by the Director of Audit
at the Public Hearing of the Public Accounts Committee
of the Legislative Council on Saturday, 14 December 2019**

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for inviting me here to give a brief account of Chapter 1 of Report No. 73 of the Director of Audit, entitled “Planning, provision and management of public toilets by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department”.

This Audit Report comprises four PARTs.

PART 1 of the Report, namely “Introduction”, describes the background of the audit.

According to the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132), the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) may provide and maintain toilets for the use of the public.

FEHD managed 798 public toilets with flushing systems and 51 aqua privies without any flushing system. From 2016-17 to 2018-19, the project costs for new construction, reprovisioning and refurbishment of public toilets were about \$280 million. During the five-year period between 2019-20 and 2023-24, the Government will allocate additional resources of about \$600 million for refurbishing about 240 public toilets.

PART 2 of the Report examines FEHD's actions in planning and provision of public toilets.

Utilisation rate is a key criterion for considering the provision of public toilets by FEHD. In 2018 or earlier, FEHD used manual counting to collect data on the number of visitors to public toilets. Since early 2019, FEHD has progressively used infrared sensor counting. The Audit Commission (Audit) noted that for 93 of the 149 public toilets which had used both counting methods, there were considerable variances between the utilisation rates found by the two counting methods.

Since 2004, FEHD has adopted 1:2 for male-to-female toilet compartment ratio as a general guideline. However, of the 798 public toilets, 421 (i.e. 53%) toilets did not meet the ratio (i.e. with fewer female compartments than required), of which 360 toilets were constructed or refurbished after 2004. In addition, 418 (i.e. 52%) of the 798 public toilets were not provided with accessible unisex toilets.

Under FEHD's Public Toilet Refurbishment Programme, public toilets being given priority include those with high utilisation rates and located at tourist spots. However, of the 798 public toilets, 138 toilets had not been refurbished for 11 to 18 years, including 29 toilets with high utilisation rates.

According to FEHD guidelines, consideration will be given to providing public toilets at tourist spots. Audit noted that some Legislative Council Members and District Council Members had expressed concerns on inadequate public toilets at tourist spots from time to time. In addition, in planning for refurbishment of public toilets, FEHD had not regularly consulted the Tourism Commission or other stakeholders of the tourism industry regarding conditions of public toilets at tourist spots.

PART 3 of the Report examines actions taken by the Architectural Services Department (ArchSD) and FEHD in managing public toilet works projects.

FEHD mainly engages ArchSD in implementing public toilet works projects. From 2016-17 to 2018-19, ArchSD completed construction of two public toilets and reprovisioning of five public toilets, but about 1 month to 11 months later than the target completion dates. For the reprovisioning of a public toilet in the North District, there was a delay of about 8 months in completing the works. Inadequate resource of the contractor was one of the reasons for the delay.

As of August 2019, there were 84 public toilets included in the Refurbishment Programmes with works not yet completed, including 44 toilets which had been included in the Programmes for about four to eight years after obtaining funding approval. For a public toilet in Yuen Long with works still in progress for eight years after inclusion in the Refurbishment Programme, it took about seven years to work out the design for refurbishment works due to factors including land allocation/acquisition and requests arising from local consultations.

In February 2005, FEHD implemented a programme to convert aqua privies into flushing toilets by seven phases. The initiative was included in the Policy Agenda in 2007-08, with the target of converting all aqua privies into flushing toilets by 2012-13. However, as of June 2019, there were still 51 aqua privies, of which 18 aqua privies had been planned for demolition and the remaining 33 aqua privies were at different stages of conversion works (e.g. under study or in progress).

PART 4 of the Report examines FEHD's management of public toilets.

FEHD has 19 District Environmental Hygiene Offices (DEHOs) for monitoring and management of district environmental hygiene services and facilities in the 18 districts, including public toilets and aqua privies. Cleansing

services of public toilets and aqua privies are provided by contractors or FEHD in-house cleansing workmen. FEHD staff periodically conduct inspections of conditions of hygiene, cleanliness and facilities of the public toilets and aqua privies. Of the 19 DEHOs, Audit selected four DEHOs for examination.

FEHD guidelines have set out the frequency of routine inspections and for facilities in remote area, DEHOs can exercise discretion to determine the most suitable minimum inspection frequency. Audit noted that, of the four DEHOs selected for examination, two DEHOs had exercised discretion under FEHD guidelines to adjust downwards the frequencies of routine inspections for 104 public toilets. The adjustment involved a large number of public toilets converted from aqua privies. In addition, the actual numbers of routine inspections conducted by two DEHOs were fewer than scheduled by 11% and 24% respectively.

Regarding conditions of toilet facilities, from 2015 to 2018, the number of defects referred to the maintenance agents for rectification increased by 33%, while the number of toilets only increased by 1%. Based on the repair and maintenance requests received by ArchSD for public toilets and aqua privies from January 2015 to June 2019, some public toilets required frequent repair and maintenance. In particular, for six public toilets, the number of their repair and maintenance requests averaged 89 to 128 requests per year.

Audit conducted site visits in May and June 2019 respectively to 30 public toilets. The site visits found that some toilets had a large number of defective facilities and were in poor hygiene conditions. The site visits also found that some toilets were not properly used by the public.

According to FEHD, toilet attendant services are provided in public toilets with high utilisation rates or at tourist spots. However, Audit noted that some toilets meeting these criteria were not provided with attendant services, and some toilets provided with attendant services did not meet these criteria. Audit also noted that there was scope for improvement in the provision of attendant rooms and facilities therein.

In the light of the above audit findings, Audit has made recommendations to FEHD and ArchSD accordingly.

Our views and recommendations were agreed by FEHD and ArchSD. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge with gratitude the full cooperation, assistance and positive response of the staff of both departments during the course of the audit review.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.