

**For discussion
on 8 November 2005**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Crematorium and Columbarium Facilities

Purpose

This paper aims to brief Members on the public crematorium and columbarium facilities, plans to increase cremation capacity, measures taken to alleviate the problem of insufficient niches, and invite their views.

Background

2. Following population growth, the yearly number of deaths in Hong Kong has increased in the past decade from 30,894 in 1995 to 37,322 in 2004 and is estimated to increase to 47,000 in 2015. Due to limited land supply for coffin burials, the Government has been encouraging the public to adopt cremation in lieu of coffin burials as the means of disposal of dead bodies since the 1970s. The adoption of cremation as a means of disposal of the dead has been rising steadily in the last 30 years from 35% (7,300 cremations) in 1975 to 84% (31,000 cremations) in 2004. The cremation rate is anticipated to rise further in the coming decade and would probably level off at about 90% in 2010s. We consider that the Government should continue to improve/upgrade the existing public crematorium facilities and to expand/increase public columbarium facilities so as to meet the increasing public demand and the non-Government sector should also be encouraged to play a more proactive role in the future provisioning of crematorium/columbarium facilities.

Crematoria

3. At present, all crematorium facilities open for public use are provided by the Government. There are a total of six Government

crematoria (**Annex I**), providing 32 cremators with a total capacity of about 34,400 cremation sessions a year. Since 2000, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has committed in its performance pledge to arrange cremation sessions within 15 days of application and has been able to achieve this target despite increasing demand for cremation services so far. However, increasing number of cases is arranged between 11 and 15 days (28% in 2001 to 93% in 2004).

4. There are six private crematoria at Buddhist monasteries but they are of very small scale and serve only their deceased inmates. They are not open for public use. So far, the private sector has not invested in building any commercial crematorium.

Columbaria

5. Niches are provided by both the Government and the private sector. The Government manages a total of about 138,000 niches in eight Government columbaria (see **Annex I**). There are 14 columbaria situated within private cemeteries, many operated by religious or ethnic organizations for non-profit making purposes. Under the Private Cemeteries Regulation, Cap. 132, fees to be charged at these private cemeteries including niches are subject to Government approval. Separately, some private organizations and/or temples also operate a number of private columbaria outside cemeteries on a full commercial basis. The operation and prices of services of private columbaria situated outside private cemeteries are not regulated by the Government.

6. Government niches are heavily subsidized by public funding. As niches provided by Government are much cheaper than those provided by private institutions¹ and as there are membership restrictions on interment in niches provided by religious bodies, etc., there has been a strong demand for Government niches. In 2004, 4,400 Government niches were sold to the public. All new niches provided by Government have been sold out in March 2005. Presently, about 200 vacated niches in Government columbaria remain available for the public. These unallocated niches are anticipated to be sold out shortly.

¹ The price of Government niches ranges from \$2,800 - \$4,000 dependent on whether they are in the urban areas/New Territories and size (standard or family niche). In comparison, Government niches are priced lower than commercial columbaria (i.e. \$30,000 – over \$120,000).

Plans on New Crematorium and Columbarium Facilities

7. Despite the rising demand for cremation and niches in recent years, the public at large generally do not favour the presence of crematorium and columbarium (C&C) in their neighbourhood possibly due to psychological reasons. The public are also concerned about environmental implications, and the operation of crematoria after the normal office hours and over weekends when most residents in the neighbourhood are at home. For columbaria, there is also public concern on the traffic flow/crowd control problems generated by the large number of grave-sweepers during the special festivals at Ching Ming and Chung Yeung. While proposed locations in remote areas are less likely to invite public objections, the inadequate supporting transport network and environmental impact arising from the construction and operation of the crematorium/columbarium facilities have ruled out many otherwise suitable sites. The Planning Department advised that apart from the existing cemetery/columbarium/crematorium sites, 22 hectares of unallocated Government land in Tuen Mun Area 46 has been reserved on the Tuen Mun Outline Zoning Plan for 'Crematorium, Columbarium and Funeral Services Centre' uses. Apart from this site, it would be very difficult to identify other sites to develop C&C facilities in view of the public concern and other problems highlighted above.

Plans for New Government Cremators

8. To cope with the rising demand for cremation services, the Government has been upgrading/reprovisioning cremators, taking advantage of the new technology² to enhance the handling capacity as well as to improve control on their air emission. All eight cremators at Kwai Chung and Fu Shan Crematoria were replaced by more efficient ones in the past two years. Six re-provisioned cremators are now under construction in Diamond Hill Crematorium and upon their commissioning in 2006, the annual Government cremation capacity will be increased from the current 34,400 sessions by 13% to 38,900 sessions.

² Old standard cremators built before the 2000s normally handle three sessions per day. New standard cremators built after 2000 could normally handle six sessions and hence double the cremation capacity of old cremators

9. We are also working on the following plans to replace the existing cremators at Wo Hop Shek and Cape Collinson which are heavily patronized and plan to consult relevant District Councils and seek funding approval from the Finance Committee in due course :

- (a) Wo Hop Shek Crematorium - Demolition of the existing four cremators will commence in end 2007, to be followed by the construction of six (excluding one dedicated for bone cremation) new cremators in situ for commissioning around 2010 in Phase I, and of another two new cremators for commissioning in 2014 in Phase II. As a result, its cremation capacity will ultimately increase from the current annual capacity of 3,816 sessions by 10,812 sessions (283%) to 14,628 sessions.
- (b) Cape Collinson Crematorium – 2-phase programme would be adopted so that the 12 existing cremators at Cape Collinson could remain in operation during the construction of the Phase I to cope with the cremation demands. Four new cremators to be built at the carpark site under Phase I will commence in mid 2009 for commissioning in end 2011 tentatively, to be followed by the demolition of all existing 12 cremators to make way for another five new cremators in Phase II for commissioning around 2014. As a result, its cremation capacity will ultimately increase from its current annual capacity of 10,278 sessions by 4,986 sessions (49%) to 15,264 sessions.

10. Upon the commissioning of the six reprovisioned cremators at Wo Hop Shek and four reprovisioned cremators at Cape Collinson, the annual cremation capacity provided by the 26 cremators would be increased to around 42,600 in 2011/12 which is barely adequate to meet the expected cremation demand of around 40,000 sessions at that time. We do not expect improvement in waiting time until the remaining two cremators at Wo Hop Shek and five cremators at Cape Collinson under the Phase II programmes are commissioned in 2014. By then, the total annual cremation capacity of the 33 cremators would be increased by 59% from the current 34,400 sessions to around 54,700 sessions and the

waiting time could probably shorten from the current 15 days to 13 days³. A table setting out the number of existing/planned cremators and the anticipated annual supply of cremation sessions in various stages upon commissioning of the reprovisioned/new cremators are at **Annex II**.

11. In the interim period before the commissioning of the re-provisioned cremators at Cape Collinson and Wo Hop Shek, we would continue to maintain the existing cremators in proper operation. We would also flexibly adjust the hours of operations of the crematoria to cope with public demand as and where necessary with a view to fulfilling our pledge to arrange a cremation session within 15 days of application. To prevent overloading public mortuaries and make the best use of the cremation sessions, we would urge bereaved applicants to try their best to avoid insisting conducting cremation only on auspicious dates/weekends. The Government would also encourage the non-Government sector to provide crematorium so as to increase the overall cremation capacity (see also para. 21 below).

Plans for New Government Niches

12. To meet the immediate shortage of niches, plans are on hand to make available about 10,000 new niches at Columbaria at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung and Wo Hop Shek in the first half of 2006 and another 1,000 new niches at Cheung Chau Columbarium by end 2006 as follows :

Location	Estimated no. of niches
Cape Collinson Columbarium	2,100
Kwai Chung Columbarium	2,400
Wo Hop Shek Columbarium	5,500
Cheung Chau Columbarium	1,000
Total	11,000

13. In the medium term, the Government plans to undertake the following projects at Kwai Chung and Diamond Hill Columbaria and Wo

³ The waiting time is expected to gradually lengthen again as we approach 2020 due to expected increase in cremation demand unless more cremators could be made available by then.

Hop Shek Cemetery to provide about 24,600 new niches between 2007 and 2008 :

- (a) Kwai Chung Columbarium – construction of two additional storeys on top of the existing columbarium block to provide around 3,200 new niches for commissioning by end 2007 subject to funding approval.
- (b) Diamond Hill Columbarium - construction of an additional columbarium block to provide about 18,500 new niches by end 2008 subject to funding approval from the Finance Committee in early 2006.
- (c) Wo Hop Shek Cemetery – construction of small columbarium blocks to provide about 2,900 new niches by 2007 subject to funding approval.

14. In the longer term, the Government plans to provide 135,000 new niches in existing cemetery/columbarium sites at Wo Hop Shek, Kwai Chung and Fu Shan as follows :

- (a) Wo Hop Shek Cemetery – construction of two new columbarium blocks to provide about 73,500 (31,500 at a carpark site and 42,000 at a hillside site) new niches by late 2010 and mid-2011 respectively.
- (b) Kwai Chung Columbarium – construction of a new columbarium block at the old cremator site to provide about 44,000 new niches by end of 2010.
- (c) Fu Shan Columbarium – construction of an additional columbarium block on a vacant site nearby to provide about 17,500 new niches by around 2011.

15. If all these plans are confirmed to be technically feasible and could work out smoothly without objections from locals and the District Councils, the Government should be able to increase the total number of niches from the current 138,000 by around 170,600 (or 124%) within the

next decade to 308,600. In the meantime, we will continue to explore possibilities for the best way forward in developing Tuen Mun Area 46 for C&C purposes.

16. To make the best use of the limited land available for building columbaria and having regard to niche design in non-Government columbaria, we have to introduce the following new design to columbaria commissioned from 2009 onwards in order to deliver the large number of niches :

- (a) to increase the number of storeys to the maximum as far as site conditions permit and having regard to the visual impact on the surrounding, say from the current norm of 7 storeys to at least 9 storeys⁴;
- (b) to increase the number of rows of niches in each storey from the current norm of 7/8 rows to 9 rows⁵;
- (c) to build more standard niches (for holding two urns) and less family ones (for holding four urns). For the new columbaria projects at Kwai Chung, Fu Shan, and Wo Hop Shek under planning and other new projects in future, no family niches will be provided; and
- (d) to build some ‘smoke-free’ columbarium blocks so that the space for joss paper burner, width of passageway, etc. can be saved / reduced. ‘Smoke-free’ columbarium blocks provided by the private sector are well received.

In the event that new designs are not used, the number of niches provided under the columbarium projects set out in paragraph 14 above would be reduced by roughly 20%.

17. To encourage more bereaved families to dispose of the ashes of the deceased at the eight Garden of Remembrance (GOR) in Government crematoria instead of niches, as a pilot scheme, we are now

⁴ Columbarium buildings in the non-Government sector are up to 11 storeys

⁵ It is quite common for niches provided by the private sector to have more than 7 rows. Indeed, some have up to 14 rows.

upgrading the GOR at Cape Collinson Columbarium by beautifying the landscaping features and erecting a wall for mounting 1,000 plaques in memory of the deceased. We would widely publicize this new GOR which is scheduled for completion in late 2006 and would make similar improvement to other GORs if necessary to help ease the heavy demand for niches.

The Board of Management of the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries

18. The Board of Management of Chinese Permanent Cemeteries (BMCPC) is established under the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries Ordinance to manage cemeteries for persons of Chinese race permanent resident in Hong Kong. The BMCPC manages four cemeteries with columbaria providing 195,000 niches. In the last three years, the BMCPC sold about 10,000 niches on average each year. All BMCPC niches are expected to be sold out by end of 2005. The BMCPC will develop 25,000 additional niches in its Cape Collinson Chinese Permanent Cemetery for completion by phases in 2006 and 2007. All of its other cemeteries do not have further development potential. The BMCPC is proactively exploring the feasibility of seeking the Government's agreement to designate an area within the Wo Hop Shek Cemetery for developing new columbarium facilities to cater for longer term demand.

Alternative Approaches for Urns

19. The annual demand for Government niches and BMCPC's managed niches was about 50-60% of the number of annual cremation sessions in the last few years. Assuming such rate of demand remains unchanged, there will possibly be a shortfall of around 22,000 niches in 2009 and shortfall will occur again after 2014 even if both the Government and BMCPC succeed in implementing all the columbarium projects listed above unless more new columbaria facilities could be put in place.

20. In addition to the new columbarium designs and our continued efforts to identify more sites for building columbaria, we need to adopt an alternative approach in the storage of ashes in urns. At present,

Government niches are allocated to bereaved families on a permanent basis. We could no longer afford to continue this perpetual interment practice bearing in mind the limited land supply suitable for building columbaria and the growing demand for cremation service and niches in Hong Kong. To address this problem, a possible option is to limit the interment of cinerary urns in newly allocated niches to say 10 years, after which the bereaved families would have to renew the lease on a regular basis. Unclaimed ashes in the non-renewed niches would be removed for scattering in gardens of remembrance. The Government would need to introduce a new fee for such time-limited lease through legislative amendment. We believe this approach which is practised overseas is more equitable to our community. This approach would on the one hand help put the niches into better use when the bereaved families are no longer paying visits to the urns concerned after a certain period of time and on the other hand help address the land shortage problem for developing more columbaria.

More Active Role by the Non-Government Sector

21. While Government should continue to provide the public with crematoria/columbaria, we consider that the non-Government sector including the private sector should be encouraged to play a much more active role in providing private crematoria/columbaria for use by the public on a commercial or not-for-profit basis. This will help reduce demand for Government services, widen public choices, improve service quality, and create new business opportunities for the trade to develop integrated one-stop service from undertaker to niche burial. The provision of cremation service by the non-Government sector would also help release more cremation sessions/niches from Government facilities for use by the public, thereby shortening their waiting time. The Government will further develop the idea and invite the non-government sector to tender for such development projects.

Advice Sought

22. Members are invited to note the proposals set out above and

to offer views.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
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Annex I

Crematorium and Columbarium Facilities Provided by the Government

Crematorium Facilities

Location	No. of Cremators	Capacity of Cremation Sessions per year
Cape Collinson Crematorium	12	10,278
Diamond Hill Crematorium	6	5,724
Fu Shan Crematorium (at Sha Tin)	4	5,724
Kwai Chung Crematorium	4	6,996
Wo Hop Shek Crematorium	4	3,816
Cheung Chau Crematorium	2	1,908
Total	32	34,446

Columbarium Facilities

Location	No. of Niches
Cape Collinson Columbarium	59,527
Diamond Hill Columbarium	43,310
Fu Shan Columbarium	9,625
Kwai Chung Columbarium	3,508
Wo Hop Shek Columbarium	19,890
Cheung Chau Columbarium	1,309
Lamma Island Columbarium	490
Peng Chau Columbarium	490
Total	138,149

Table to show the number of existing/planned cremators and annual cremation capacity

Crematorium	2005 Present Position		2006 After commissioning of 6 new cremators at Diamond Hill		2010/11 After commissioning of 6 new cremators at Wo Hop Shek and 4 new cremators at Cape Collinson		2014 After commissioning of 2 new cremators at Wo Hop Shek and 5 new cremators at Cape Collinson	
	No. of Coffin Cremators	Annual Capacity of Cremation Sessions	No. of Coffin Cremators	Annual Capacity of Cremation Sessions	No. of Coffin Cremators	Annual Capacity of Cremation Sessions	No. of Coffin Cremators	Annual Capacity of Cremation Sessions
Cape Collinson Crematorium	12	10,278	12	10,278	4	6,360	9	15,264
Diamond Hill Crematorium	6	5,724	6	10,176	6	10,176	6	10,176
Fu Shan Crematorium	4	5,724	4	5,724	4	5,724	4	5,724
Kwai Chung Crematorium	4	6,996	4	6,996	4	6,996	4	6,996
Wo Hop Shek Crematorium	4	3,816	4	3,816	6	11,448	8	14,628
Cheung Chau Crematorium	2	1,908	2	1,908	2	1,908	2	1,908
Total	32	34,446	32	38,898	26	42,612	33	54,696