

*Burial and cremation services*

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The Audit Commission ("Audit") conducted a review of the burial and cremation services provided by the Cemeteries and Crematoria Section of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD"). FEHD manages 10 public cemeteries, six public crematoria and eight public columbaria (with 11 gardens of remembrance), and regulates the operation of 27 private cemeteries. In view of the public concern over the shortage in supply of public niches and the regulation of private columbaria in recent years, the Government has adopted a three-pronged strategy in its columbarium policy, i.e. increasing the supply of public columbaria, enhancing the regulation of private columbaria and promoting green burials.

2. The Committee noted the following findings from the Director of Audit's Report:

- FEHD introduced in 2010 the District-based Columbarium Development Scheme ("the Scheme") and identified 24 sites in 18 districts for columbarium development. However, the implementation progress of the Scheme was not satisfactory. The Administration was unable to set a definite timetable for consultation with relevant District Councils on 16 projects. Only two small projects (2 540 niches) had been completed up to July 2015 and the next major project (160 000 niches) would not be completed until 2019. As a result of project delays, there would be practically no supply of new public niches under the Scheme from 2016 to 2018;
- according to the proposed licensing scheme under the Private Columbaria Bill, it would be an offence to operate a private columbarium without a licence/an exemption/a temporary suspension<sup>1</sup> of liability. In order to apply for an exemption, a private columbarium must have ceased selling or letting out niches since the announcement of the Bill on 18 June 2014. In this connection, supply of niches from private columbaria has been affected;
- when the proposed licensing scheme came into operation (expected to be in mid-2016), all private columbaria could not sell or let out niches unless they had obtained licences. However, application for a licence could only be made three months later to allow time for the setting up of the Licensing Board. Moreover, time was required for processing

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<sup>1</sup> A temporary suspension of liability allows a pre-Bill columbarium to continue operation (without selling of interment rights) before a licence/exemption is issued. Therefore, when applying for a licence/exemption, a pre-Bill columbarium will also apply for a temporary suspension of liability.

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applications before licences could be issued, and the number of licences to be issued and the number of niches allowed for each licence could not be ascertained at this stage. The supply from licensed columbaria would be uncertain in the coming years;

- many private columbaria did not comply with statutory and government requirements arising from town planning, land leases and building safety, and the enforcement actions against unauthorized private columbaria were not adequate. The number of unauthorized private columbaria increased from 52 to 124 between December 2010 and June 2015;
- FEHD allocated some 45 000 new public niches in three phases from 2012 to 2015 by computer balloting, leaving many public niches vacant for a long time and some unsuccessful applicants waiting endlessly;
- a public niche was designed to hold two urns (standard niche) to four urns (large niche). However, the utilization of urn spaces in public niches was low. About 155 000 (77%) of some 201 000 occupied niches had unused urn spaces that could hold a total of around 176 000 additional urns;
- FEHD conducted on-site surveys of its urn graves and found some 37 000 cases in which the name of the deceased inscribed on the grave headstone did not match with FEHD records. Nevertheless, FEHD did not take follow-up actions until it received exhumation applications, and it had only completed the follow-up of 1 455 mismatch cases. FEHD also had not disclosed the survey results and the progress of following up mismatch cases;
- FEHD had been taking measures since 2007 to encourage the community's acceptance of more sustainable forms of green burials, including the scattering of ashes at gardens of remembrance and at sea, so as to provide a more sustainable way for disposal of cremated ashes. Despite FEHD's promotion efforts, green burials account for only 9% of cremations in 2014; and
- cremation of traditional coffins was considered costly and not environmentally friendly as they were made of wood. In 2006, FEHD started to promote the use of eco-coffins (made of recycled paper/cardboard rather than wood). However, among the

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41 244 cremations of dead bodies in 2014, there were only 829 (2%) cases of using eco-coffins.

3. The Committee did not hold any public hearing on this subject. Instead, it asked for written responses regarding measures to step up and expedite the implementation of the Scheme, the handling of vacant urn burial spaces and mismatch cases of urn graves, utilization of public niches and urn graves, issues of promotion and management of the service of temporary storage of cremated ashes, policy to address the shortage in short-term supply of private niches, the effectiveness of FEHD's Online Cremation Booking Service System and promotion strategies for the use of eco-coffins. The replies from **Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene** are in *Appendix 66*.

4. The Committee wishes to be kept informed of the progress made in implementing the various recommendations made by Audit.